

Westford wanderings

The old gray mare turned into yellow bus

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WESTFORD - As last minute taxpayers rushed a fortnight ago to beat the deadline to pay their semi-annual "dues" to the town, some must have conjured up the now corny remarks of Ben Franklin two centuries ago: "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes."

We are certain of the taxes and of death, but the exact time of death, we are never sure.

As one refigured his check-book balance, straining to see if there hopefully could be some previous deposits not entered, he scanned once again his new tax bill.

Printed in four places, possibly for emphasis, are the figures \$14.70 for school costs and \$8 per thousand valuation for meeting the other many town services. Mentally, he figures quickly: "Wow, I'm paying two bucks for operating our educational system to only one dollar for the remainder of the town duties."

Unbelieved by many, but

nevertheless true, school committees, realizing the proportionally high costs of their departments over others, constantly seek ways to trim the yearly school budget.

One large item is the cost of transporting pupils.

The largest town in the county, Westford has over 130 miles of roads, with potential students tucked in all along these routes. They have to be bused to school.

And the costs: Teaching salaries comprise the highest item, operating costs come second, and 7 percent of the budget is consumed by those yellow buses dashing back and forth, picking up or delivering.

School officials recently placed on hold a plan to evaluate the comparative costs of owning school buses or continuing with the present system of engaging private contractors. But this is certain to come up again.

A common expression years ago was that if one did not have a means of transportation, he went by shanks' mare. In more simple words, he just walked.

Grandparents today well remember the days when students, big and small, either walked to school regardless of the weather, or if fortunate, could ride with some more affluent family who had a horse and a "democrat" wagon or sled. Everyone was on his own.

This will never come again.

And grandparents who were forced to use the mythical "shanks' mare" will agree that the school bus is here to stay, too. Further, no doubt school officials will continue to search for the most inexpensive but safest way to get young people back and forth to school.

There was a period when grade school youngsters by law had to be bused; for Academy boys and girls, this came later.

Leo Connell, Westford's postmaster for 20 years and now in his 80s, recalls his brothers and sisters walked the five miles from the Scribner Hill area to the Academy if the family horse was required on the farm. In bad weather, the horse was stabled in one of the many barns in the Cen-

ter during school hours.

Afternoons, when time was plentiful, he and his brother John played ball by the mile on the way home to pass the time. John would pitch to him, the Leo would bat the ball, always in the direction of home to supper cooked by his mother with the help of some of his seven sisters.

Coming by shanks' mare from Forge Village, often avoiding the muddy roads by walking along the edge of the woodlands, were such graduates as Josephine Socha Connell, now 83 and a member of the Class of 1917, Beatrice Collins, Edith Greenslade and Bob Spinner. In really rough weather, they could take the electric trolley to North Chelmsford, switch back to Brookside, and then the little trolley (along with students from Brookside) to the Academy, which is now the Roudenbush Center.

Frank B. Jarvis lives in the farmhouse at 62 Griffin Road where he was born 78 years ago. He recalls the days when "a kid had to get to school the best way

he could."

He started his education, together with the many-membered Griffin family nearby, at the Parkerville grade school, now the Nonset Clubhouse at the junction of Carlisle and Concord roads.

Sometimes they had a chance to pool rides in the family carriage, but more often they walked the mile or so distance. In the winter, the town paid \$1 a week for their transportation.

Upon graduation from the little country school, it was again get to the Academy, four miles distant, the best way they could. Starting in the fall of 1922, the town began a modest transportation system, operated by independents.

A fleet of five Reo Speed Wagons was purchased by five individuals from George F. White, who operated a registered cattle dairy farm in the Center as well as the Reo Sales Agency on Middlesex Street in Lowell.

The Speed Wagon was a very popular medium-sized truck with a long body and a canvas top

and sides. Students sat on benches which ran along the sides with a single settee in the middle for the smaller children.

Old timers will remember that Hunks Clement drove the Brookside (Nabnasset) youngsters to school, as the street car line had been abandoned. George Burke gathered the students from the northern part of town, Jack Gray from Forge Village and Graniteville, and George Kimball and James Wilson from other parts of town.

This was primitive, but welcomed, transportation by today's manner of operating, even though they were aptly named "barges."

And now the nearly century-old Cameron School at Forge is under consideration for abandonment, or will it be the William E. Frost School in the Center built in 1905? Whichever one is selected, it will be a sad period for many of the alumni - and more busing, perhaps?