

# They rode a 'barge' to school in Westford

By Gordon B Seavey

English dictionaries describe in brief the word barge as a vessel of various descriptions which plies the seas or more commonly is towed on rivers.

To Westford natives of at least three generations a barge was the vehicle in which youngsters were transported to school. Is this meaning colloquial to the town?

In the early public school days of Westford it is presumed the few students walked to the nearest school usually held in residences in four districts called squadrons. In 1733 squadrons were at the Center Parkerville area, the West corresponding to the Forge village section, and the North. In the region about Long Sought For Pond.

An early law compelled the town to hire graduates from Cambridge to take charge of the local school system, to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the University (Harvard).

By 1851 the town had ten district schools, the Granitville area being number 10.

At the beginning of the 20th century roads were much improved making for better and faster transportation. Gradually the process of consolidating the schools had begun with the smaller schools being phased out.

Contracts were arranged with farmers usually living in outlying districts to bring grade school youngsters to the nearest conveniently located school house. By 1914 the cost of transporting children amounted to \$2,700, second largest item in the school budget of \$14,000.

## What's a barge?"

The late George Kimball, owner of the well known farm of that name near the Littleton boundary line on Route 110, held a contract for many years, and also had many kids.

His barge was a common two axle farm wagon with a canopy top, the fabric sides of which could be rolled up during good weather. At the rear was a flap of

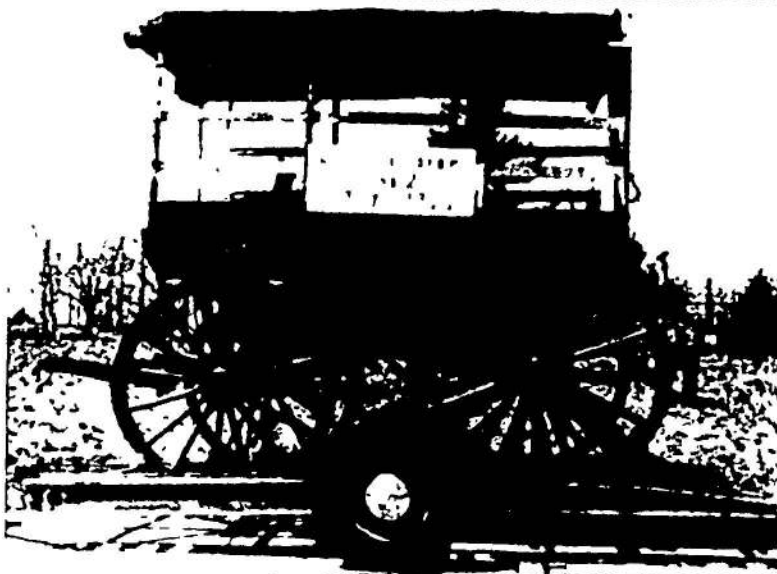
the same material but rarely used. A set of steps extended at the rear. The barge was usually hauled by a pair of horses. The driver, with a child or two by his side, sat up front.

In the winter, as hard packed snow made travelling easier, a pung with sides was substituted. This was a converted flat bed carrier with runners used for hauling cordwood. A liberal bed of hay made for a somewhat

purposes. A bench to which the smaller pupils were assigned ran down the middle.

Among owners of these vehicles were Bert Hildreth, Ed Hunks, Clement Jack Gray, Kimball, George Croucher and George Burke.

Hurke was a shrewd person living on an isolated farm in the very north part of town. While school kept he drove the local butcher, Alec Fisher (who never



Transportation for school children prior to motor vehicles was by horsedrawn barge. This one was owned by Kimball Farm, circa 1915. (Seavey photo)

warmer and more comfortable ride.

When work on the farm was at low ebb the drivers would often visit with friends while school was in session, or sit alongside the pot bellied stove at a local store.

Around the period of World War I, Reo Motor Car Company brought out a model called a Reo Speed Wagon. This was a light fast truck with pneumatic tires. Lights were controlled by a switch on the side of the steering post, as was the ignition.

Local contractors quickly saw the possibility of making a barge out of this vehicle. Along each side of the body a full length plank was attached which could be swung out of the way when the truck was to be used for other

carried to learn to operate a car) to various places in the area to pick up bull calves and sheep for slaughter. Needless to say he found it necessary to flush out the Speed Wagon before reverting to his contractual duties, i.e. carrying young students.

## A timely warning

During the transition period from horse-drawn barges to motor vehicles Superintendent of Schools Frank H. Hill passed out a friendly warning to drivers. He was supervisor of school systems in Acton, Carlisle and Littleton as well as Westford. They got the word too.

As the expression of a principle not as a complaint, he wrote, school barge drivers should very promptly heed the

signal (Klaxon) of automobiles coming up behind and leave a large margin for such automobiles to pass also they should do a little more than their share toward dividing the road with an approaching automobile.

They are charged with the protection of the children, not with the assertion of their legal rights of the road.

Fifty years ago state requirements necessitated more modern equipment. The then four local drivers individually purchased a Chevrolet chassis with a factory made bus body painted blue.

The salesman who arranged the deal tells the story even today that Burke was a tough person with whom to conclude a fair transaction. To get the haggle over, he split the difference of \$50 to get Burke's signature on the order.

This was not the end.

The two drove to Lowell to extract (a good choice of words) from his bank the necessary funds. As Burke went to the teller's window he turned to ask the salesman, "Now you wouldn't want to split that \$25, would you?" The answer was "No."

Today, a fleet of yellow buses scurry about town, many from morning to night. To transport students today to the various classes throughout the community, it takes 18 buses, owned by six contractors.

The number of miles travelled last year came to 152,000 according to Doris Santaguida of the school department. Ninety percent of Westford's 3,200 students are bused today at a cost of \$330,000.

Still living in the house where he was born on Griffin Road near the South Chelmsford line, Frank B. Jarvis recalls his school days at the Academy, class of 1923. "Every kid had to get to school the best way he could. Times sure have changed."

If living, those drivers of the old school barges would probably say the same.