

# Hand-drawn hose cart recalls sparks mustering to fight fires

By Gordon B. Seavey

Nearly each week some article concerned with Westford's past turns up at the door of the local museum. They cover a large range, such as old farm tools, faded photos with folks in period dress and hairstyles, rusty kitchen and farm tools, and a long assortment of memorabilia.

A day several weeks ago was no exception.

It was a weird two-wheeled contraption which an oldtimer immediately recognized as a hand-drawn fire hose cart, somewhat common a century ago. It had been in storage all these many years in a remote section of the vast mill complex at Forge Village, first owned by the Abbot Worsted Company and later by its successors, the Murray Printing Company, who donated the contraption to the museum.

Eagerly accepted by museum workers Lloyd Blanchard and Alex Belida, they are now wondering, with the building's limited interior space, just how it can best be put on display. Surely firebugs of today would wish to see how great-grandpa risked his life in days past in the fire fighting business.

Research shows that there were once three of these contraptions, all purchased in haste at a special bond

issue (at 5 percent) to be "paid by four promissory notes of \$550 over four years, with interest payable semi-annually."

The purchase was to include the necessary hose to go with each carriage plus other apparatus. The Center, Forge Village and Graniteville were to benefit from the new purchase.

Three fire companies had been formed. Edward M. Abbot Hose Co. No. 1 was for the Center, the Alfred R. Choate No. 2 for Graniteville and John Edwards Hose No. 3 for Forge.

## Initial water system

One would ask why this flurry, buying three hose carts at a special town meeting, where no other business had been conducted. A limited water system had been installed by the private Westford Water Company for the three "villages", costing somewhere in the vicinity of \$60,000. The town had agreed to take 40 hydrants for fire protection hookups.

When the first flow of water coursed in through the limited system in 1907, the residents realized the street hydrants were useless there were fire hose to connect with the fire plugs. Therefore, the hastily organized fire department.

The hose carts were stored in a convenient location. Upon word of a

fire, whoever was nearest to the cart would rush the hose lines to the hydrant nearest the blaze, hoping that would be hose of sufficient length.

When unreeled, a person would couple the hose to the hydrant, the same as firemen do today. There was always good pressure to the lines from standpipes on Prospect or Kissacook Hills, but if the hose didn't reach the conflagration, all efforts were in vain.

Perhaps in such cases, the word got around town that the cellar hole has been saved.

## Social outlet

These fire companies were great on socializing. Comprised of friends and buddies who were sparks, there were occasions for suppers when the wives put on the "feed", and no one ever recalled the number of card ing equipment. Always on the alert!

A faded newspaper clipping tells of a popular event in 1910, a fireman's muster on Broadway in Graniteville. The local company was host to "a large crowd." There were souvenir vendors, try to hit the African Dodger, and other goings on, waiting for the principal event, the hose cart race.

The idea was to see which team,

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Staff photo by Kyle Bajakian

Museum curator Connie English admires a turn-of-century fire hose cart donated by Murray Printing Company. Note the hand grips at the end of the shaft. Daniel Bach, vice president and general manager of Murray Printing, is on hand at the Town Museum on Boston Road for the presentation.

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## Fire hose cart donated

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made up of five members from the three companies, could run 100 yards carrying two lengths of hose the fastest. They had to connect the hose to the hydrant and draw water. This was repeated three times and the top scores were tabulated at the end.

Results were often contested but on this day Forge Village won the silver trophy with 29-1/5 seconds.

Another feature was a one-mile foot race between Elliott of Forge Village and York of the host company. These were the days before

motion picture cameras or TV, so it was never proven who won this event.

"It was regretted that the result was unsatisfactory owing to some misunderstanding as to the number of laps made by the contestants," the newspaper account read.

There were events for the youngsters, such as hoops, step and jump, dashes and more distance runs. A supper was held in Healy's Hall, with speechmaking preceding the dancing 'til 11:30. It was announced another muster was in the offing.