

Memories of many town firsts linger beyond old Abbot Hall

The Murray Printing Company has become a landmark in its own right, operating out of the former Abbot Worsted Company buildings in Forge Village. The Abbot Company was typical of mills of its time in taking a paternalistic role in the community. The Abbot Hall occupied an important position in the social lives of not only mill employees, but residents throughout the area.

By Gordon B. Seavey

A Forge Village landmark, venerable Abbot Hall which took many months to construct at the turn of the century, became a mass of rubble in a single day on March 13, 1980.

The Murray Printing Company, owners of the building since 1958, were reluctant to demolish the hall but it was fast becoming a problem. While its basement was used for some storage, the upper part had been idled by changing times for many years. Vandals were beginning to tear the building apart. No practical use could be found for the hall.

According to plant engineer Robert A. Allard, its removal allowed for much needed extra parking for workers and visitors to Murray's.

The granite front steps were removed to storage; the cut granite foundation, from a nearby quarry, was saved for use in building artistic retaining walls.

The restorers of the Fiske House in Chelmsford Center (now the site of First Bank) wanted the roof, but asked for two months to remove the slate. Plant officials felt that with the many hazards involved in removing them, plus the continued vandalism in the area, the project would not be practical.

Full of memories

As the lethal swinging ball on a wrecking crane swung back and forth to smash the sizable wooden structure, on each passing it brought to old timers the many pleasurable memories which occurred within its walls during its long life. It was the social gathering place for the mill workers and the villagers.

The town's first motion pictures were shown there. The John Edwards Hose Co. #3, under Captain Edward Hunt, held annual balls in the auditorium. It was the practice hall for the newly organized Abbot Worsted Band.

There were socials of various kinds, whist parties, testimonials for returning war veterans and outstanding athletes, St. Patrick's Day parties and minstrel shows. Local churches and groups used the facilities, usually rent free, on many occasions.

Ex postmistress Josephine Socha Connell recalls that just prior to Christmas, youngsters from the Cameron school would file down the hill to the building for the annual visit with Abbot's Santa Claus. But the movies, the flickers, were the big thing. City entertainment was brought to the country.

Treasurer John C. Abbot of the Abbot mills was the spark plug who had the earlier hall remodeled and enlarged to accommodate these events. He also was the organizer of the Abbot soccer and baseball teams, bowling clubs, the band and the excursions by train for the benefit of the employees.

Jack Abbot (as he liked to be called) was a friend to all. He appointed his right-hand man and purchasing agent, Edward T. Hanley, to manage the movies, the company cafeteria and the band. Ed "bought" the films to be shown, bringing them from the distribution point in Boston.

Two shows a week

There was a show in the middle of the week, and always one on Saturday night. First shown was a reel of Paramount News, then one part of a serial such as "Perils of Pauline" or "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." Then came the feature. This was the era of the Gish sisters and Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford.

While some of the reels were showing in Forge, the other half was being run off in the other Abbot Hall in Graniteville. Two showings for the price of one.

Music accompanying silent film showings at Forge was superior. Cornelius Precious, a superintendent in the Abbot mills, was the father of three musically-talented daughters. They were the live trio which performed at most of the showings: Carolyn at the piano, Daisy (Pamella) on trumpet and Mildred, the violin. Either girl could play the piano equally well when called upon.

Carolyn, now Mrs. Derwood Newman of Chatham, recalls that when a real big feature was to be shown, enough sheet music for a symphony or orchestra was sent out, at other times, just a musical score from which the pianist improvised as the episodes moved on on the screen.

Arthur "Spud" Daley, who later retired to Florida, was the ticket taker and the person to maintain order. When the audience became too noisy or restless, he snapped on the lights, announcing the show would stop until order was restored. That was effective. However, when the film strip broke, hooting and hollering was allowable.

Edward Delahaye was the projectionist, assisted by Thomas May. How the kids envied them in their exalted position.

On special nights, the Abbot Worsted Company band, in their very sombre and proper uniforms (black with black stripes) would play. Leader was James Larkin of North Chelmsford whose three musical sons formed the initial core of the ensemble. Leo played saxophone, Bernie clarinet and Basil, trumpet. Earlier members included the Kelly brothers, Bill, John and Tom. Joe Blott and Jack Venn were also long-time members, as was Sigurd Peterson on the bass. The Bakers, father and son, were on the drums. There were many others, some who became quite accomplished.

Villagers remember that it was in Abbot Hall that they first witnessed the motion picture. It was also a place for romance as Dorothy Shea will attest that it was there she met her future husband, Roger J. Brule.

Billy Kelly recalled that it was always a dinner-time conversation among the younger set as to what was going to happen to Pauline in the movie sequence the coming week. It seems that last week she was about to be run over by a train, swept over a dam or left hanging on a cliff.



Pausing on the steps of Town Hall after the presentation of some 34 acres of land to the town are: (l-r) Murray Printing president Jim Conway, Executive Secretary Bob Halpin, Conservation Commission chairman Pat Loring and Murray vice president Dick Brooks.

(Photo by Brian Gonye)

Printing company presses land gift

By Andrea Cleghorn and Kathy Veth

The Murray Printing Company, located in Forge Village since 1957, recently deeded approximately 34 acres of land to the town of Westford. The community gift was accepted by unanimous vote of the Board of Selectmen at its Sept. 23 meeting.

Consultant Bill Anderson, representing Murray Printing, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Courier Corporation, was at the selectmen's meeting to discuss Murray's sizeable donation.

Anderson told selectmen he had been working with Murray for a year to complete the details and was anxious to wrap up the deal before the end of the company fiscal year on Sept. 30.

"It was more complicated than we thought at first. We feel the parcels will be a nice addition to the lands owned by the town," said Anderson.

Selectman David Earl made the motion to accept the land contingent on acceptance by the town at a later date but was told the town did not need to concur in this case.

Chairman of the Conservation Commission Patricia Loring told selectmen she had been in contact with Town Counsel Jack Connell and the parcels will be under the control of the commission.

"Jack said it [the decision to accept the land] does not have to go before the town. We have traditionally done that in Westford with all our land gifts."

Executive Secretary Robert Halpin noted, "This [the Board of Selectmen] is one of the few town

boards allowed to accept."

In a prepared statement released by Murray Printing, Loring described the land as two separate parcels.

"One parcel, about six acres, abuts the Russell Bird Sanctuary and includes the old Arch Bridge. It is one of our nicest conservation areas."

"The other parcel, 28 acres, abutting Beaver Brook, is important to us for the protection of water resources and wildlife. An area as large as this can provide considerable flood storage and wildlife protection. We greatly appreciate these land gifts as both will enhance existing town land," said Loring's statement.

Vice president of Finance for Murray Printing, Richard W. Brooks, in the same prepared statement, said, "Recent analysis of the company's real estate holdings indicated the land was not suitable for industrial expansion. Since the parcels were adjacent to existing conservation land, management felt that a donation provided an opportunity to express appreciation to the town and to its residents, many of whom are employed at Murray."

James F. Conway III, President of The Murray Printing Company stated, "We are very pleased to make this donation to the community. We feel very much a part of Westford and believe this gift will benefit Westford residents for generations to come."