

Weathering the dry spell

60 years ago, drought brought hardship to Westford farming community

By Gordon B. Seavey

With practically no snowfall last winter and the early spring rains not adding much to the water table, are we due for a "dry" summer as happened in Westford 60 years ago?

A serious drought in this area brought near disaster to local farmers three decades ago.

Lack of rainfall not only caused valuable crops to wither "on the vine" but shortages of water in wells caused a more serious problem.

Although the central areas of Westford were served by the privately-owned Westford Water Company, outlying districts depended mostly on dug wells.

There were still several large dairy farms left in the town, and anyone who ever pumped water by hand from a well to fill the oversized stomachs of thirsty cattle will never forget this tedious task.

When these wells went dry, farmers had to borrow water from neighbors who might have more of it.

However, there was a good side of things, too. Nabnasset Pond still held water, for it was reported that one angler caught a black bass which weighed in at seven pounds and measured 20 inches in length.

Good Prices

Farming in the Stony Brook Valley, where crops always grew well, Guy DeCatur and Fisher Buckshorn raised 100 bushels of choice Green Mountain potatoes which sold for \$2 per bushel, twice the price of the previous year's crop. Good hardwood was selling for \$12 a cord.

This was the year that one of Westford's most valuable documents was found in a local attic and turned over to the Fletcher Library for safekeeping. It was the Solumn League and Covenant signed by 207 Westford men (women were seen but not heard at the time this document was signed on July 4, 1774), protesting the closing of Boston harbor and declaring a boycott on British goods.

Wayland Balch and Hiram Dane were recognized as the two remaining veterans of the civil War.

This was the time that Leo Connell, who later became postmaster, was treated to a hot seat. The Mack truck he was driving for Wright Trucking caught fire, unfortunately in the most prominent place in town — in front of the Town Hall.

No Water

And that year there was another fire in almost the identical spot but of a different variety. The Walker homestead (where the fire station now stands) had a chimney fire. But with the fire station then being around the corner on Boston Road, the stalwart men soon extinguished both blazes.

Samuel Law Taylor, a town character living on the Old Oaken Bucket farm on Lowell Road, being facile with the pen as a correspondent for the local newspaper, the Westford Wardman, had to admit that the name of Brookside was fading out in favor of calling that part of Westford Nabnasset — the only name of that kind in the world, he said.

Ralph Adams Cram, noted architect, was busy making plans for remodeling the State House. He was the son of Rev.

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William A. Cram, who served as pastor for four years of the First Parish Church, beginning in 1872.

Apple Country

Westford grew mountains of apples 50 years ago and farmers would feed the culls to the animals, for food as well as moisture, to replace the dwindling supply of water. This also drew rats. With the help of the country extension service, a special drive was made to eliminate the pests.

On a cold winter's night, the barn of Walter Blanchard caught fire. There was never much hope of saving one of these large structures, usually filled with hay in the winter. Blanchard was a popular farmer and milk distributor around town and the loss was a great blow to the community.

Thirty cows, two horses and two dogs died in the conflagration. There was some insurance but, as usual, not enough.

A young motorcyclist was stopped and warned by Chief John Sullivan for "roaring down Main Street at 42 miles per hour."

That reckless driver is now a prominent Westford businessman who long ago disposed of the motorcycle.

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