

Westford Recollections

Country Store Sampler - More Yarns

By June W. Kennedy

John M. Fletcher ran the store on Lincoln Street across from the Town Common. (Today it is the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Austin D. Fletcher and is located beside the First Parish Hall). During the turn of the century years the Westford Post Office was kept here when the Democrats were in office; during a Republican Administration, it was kept at the Wright & Fletcher Store. J.M.'s daughter, Miss Eva, a most proper maiden lady, served as postmistress. When on duty her face was framed by the wearing of her cap; she wore metal rimmed glasses. J.M. was described as always wearing rubber boots. With his knees slightly bent, he was remembered as scuffling about the place. A cap and metal rimmed glasses were also a part of his dress.

Leonard Wheeler tells us a tale about J.M.: "Peanuts were prominent in the store sales. John M. had a habit of whistling a few strident notes when called upon for peanuts. It was dubbed 'John's peanut whistle.' Did you ever see a collapsible tall hat? John M. had not when Henry Hamlin came in one night with one collapsed. He asked John a price for filling it with peanuts. John gave a price which was accepted and turned around after the peanuts. When he turned back the hat was several times more capacious than he had seen. He filled it!"

Allister MacDougall tells us that John kept an orchard in his back yard. He'd pack the apples on the porch (this store also had a porch where people could sit and chat). If J.M. was whistlin' there was a good price for apples; no whistlin', the prices were low."

J. Herbert, son of John M., also ran the store for many years. During this time in the late teens, Ben Prescott went to work for him. He shared the following stories:

"It was really an old-fashioned country store; the Post Office was in one corner of it. Many things happened while I was there that amused me quite a bit. Every night there

would be a gathering of old men and boys. They would discuss all the political questions and topics of the day - about the crops, and there wasn't gonna be much of a crop of apples this year, but by the time it came time to harvest them they had all they could put into their storage plants. That happened practically every year.

"I suppose that quite a few of the people around town didn't appreciate those men being around there every night. Most took it for granted, except one newcomer to town who came in one night. He had a discussion with the postmaster about something that had gone on and he really flew off the handle. He was bawling the postmaster out and then said to him, 'How do you expect women to come in here with all those bums hanging around here?' The postmaster took it to heart and he almost jumped over the counter, grabbed the guy by the collar and he said 'Now you wait a minute! You just tell me which ones are the bums.' That kinda cooled the guy off and he apologized right there. That settled his hash.

"There were a few difficulties in delivering the orders. Once in a while when we would get orders for kerosene we would draw it into different size containers, whatever the customer might have ordered. Sometimes the cans weren't always too good and there'd be nothing over the openings to stop the kerosene from splashing out. We would take a small potato and cram it into the spout. One day I remember delivering orders; I was going down quite a steep hill. A dog ran in front of the Model-T truck. I slammed on the brakes to try to avoid hitting the dog and the kerosene cans came a slidin' down to the front end of the truck and slopped kerosene all over the groceries. The lady who owned the dog saw it and she hollered, 'Don't every try to stop for that dog, run right over him.'

"We had four different routes we would take during the week and then one day a week I would go into Lowell and

pick up groceries and things at the wholesale house. There would be stops at the wholesale grocers and stops at other places for butter, cheese and flour. Then it was back to the store to unload, stack and put things on display. We sold most anything that people would want - regular groceries, cigars, tobacco, men's overalls, jumpers and pants - things like that. There would also be screws and nails. There was quite a lot of different things. Kids would come in and want a penny's worth of this and a penny's worth of that. One of the favorites in them days was a big old-fashioned peppermint and then corn cakes. The kids would buy them and make sort of a sandwich of 'em. There really was quite a lot of those sold.

"I remember one time a lady down on Providence Road ordered a barrel of flour. She'd had the flour for a week or ten days when she called up Mr. Fletcher and told him that the flour wasn't making good bread. He didn't do anything about it till she called a second time. Well, we went down in the truck, picked up the barrel and brought it back. Without ever changing it, Mr. Fletcher took a 25 lb. bag of flour, filled up the barrel, put the barrel head all on and coopered it all up so it looked like new. We delivered it to the lady. She was quite happy to get her new barrel. Several days later the phone jangled at the store and I noticed that Mr. Fletcher kept hemming and hawing to the party on the line. Well, this same woman was bawling him out and she says, 'Do you know what I found in that new barrel of flour that you brought me - my own flour sieve!' I guess that fixed Mr. Fletcher.

"There was one party in town who used to send in a bucket and ask for 10 lbs of sugar. It used to be filled up quite often. We didn't weigh it at all - she always bought 10 lbs of sugar in that bucket. It happened one day that she needed some sugar and she wasn't coming our way. She

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Featured is the old J.M. Fletcher Store complete with piazza to accomodate the local gatherings. The Post Office was kept here during the Democratic administrations. By 1905, J. Herbert Fletcher, son of J.M. Fletcher, was operating the store and ran the following ad: "Try Fletcher's Best Mocha and Java Coffee. . .35 cents lb. 3 lbs. \$1.00.

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took it to some other store. They weighed up 10 lbs. and started dumping it into the bucket and found out they couldn't get more than 8 lbs. of sugar in that bucket. That had been going on for years. I don't know as she could blame us 'cause we never weighed it.

"J. Herbert used to deal in raw furs in season. Once in a while he would buy some fresh cut or fresh killed fur-bearing animals. It was my job to skin them out. I would take them down cellar and skin 'em out and stretch 'em on certain boards that were made for that purpose. Sometimes if you were unlucky, you'd cut one of the scent bags - which wasn't too bad, but it wasn't too good. And then people would come into the store and say, 'What's the funny smell?' We didn't like to tell 'em what it was, but I guess some probably guessed after awhile.

"Mr. Fletcher decided he wanted to get out of the grocery business, but he didn't want to give up the Post Office so he built a small building further down Lincoln Street across from the common. He moved the Post Office down there. E.E. Gray, a chain store from Littleton bought him out and I continued working right at the store.

"I can recall when I first went to work at the chain store. They put out a flyer - 3 lbs. of their own brand of coffee for a dollar. The coffee we had been selling in the old store (before E.E. Gray chain), was 59 to 69 cents a pound. Three pounds for a dollar seemed to me like a wonderful buy! In the 'old store' we used to have to grind the coffee by hand. If we had a dozen or 15 lbs sold to go out on the road, we'd weigh it up in bags - one or two lbs in a bag. Then we'd get the grinder going and grind it all at once. The chain store used an electric grinder; they also had their own coffee bags which were just a pound good. It had sort of a wire made into the bag across the top for resealing. That saved tying it up with string. In the 'old store' we had to package practically everything in paper bags and then tie it up (peas, beans and sugar - 2 lbs. and 5 lbs. and 10 lbs). I think

I still have a little gadget that we used to have in the 'old store' that you could cut the string with when you tied up a bundle of stuff. It was a little gadget on the end of the counter about the size maybe of a half a dollar. You could hook the string into that and just give it a twitch and it would cut it right off.

"It was in 1933 that I left the so-called J.M. Fletcher Store and rented from Mr. Seavey the old abandoned store next to the library. Several store owners had come and gone over the years. For a while it housed a shoe-fix and barber shop. I carried the E.E. Gray chain with me."

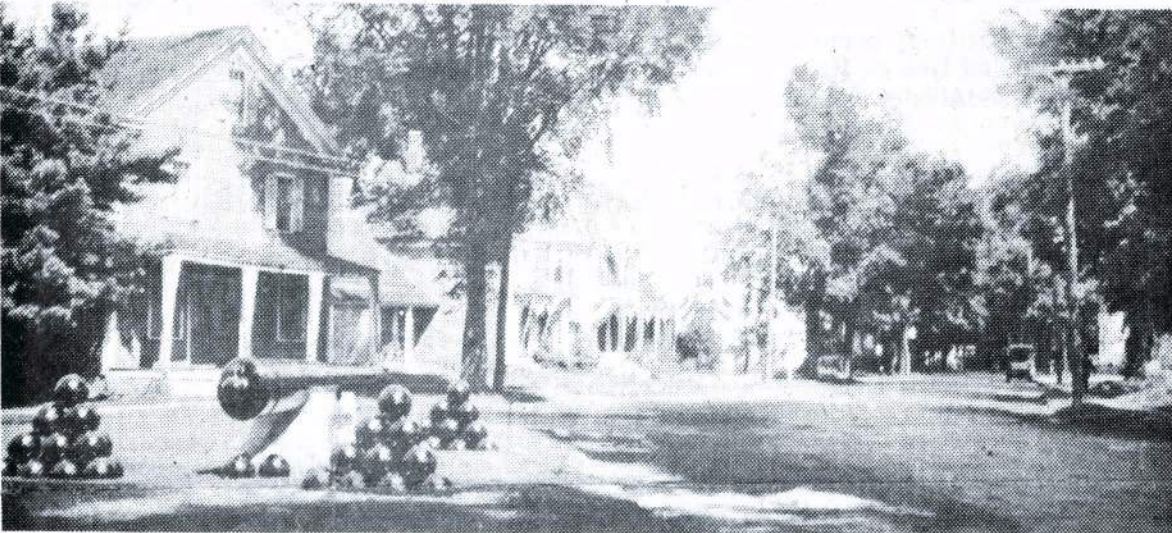
ELIZABETH BOSWORTH FIELD:

"When I was just a girl, I went over to Ben's store wearing my brushed wool lavender dress. I remember standing against the potbellied stove, hanging on one foot, then the other, delighting in being told how pretty I looked. However, I learned a lesson in vanity for I soon discovered that I'd burned a hole in the back of my pretty new dress."

Meanwhile it was in 1933 that Austin Fletcher bought the J.M. Fletcher property and set up the Red and White Store. It operated until 1958. Austin recalls that it was during the depression under Roosevelt's Administration that the WPA put in the sidewalk curbing. The store piazza then had to be removed for the sidewalk ran underneath it. In addition to the line of groceries, there was a soda fountain complete with tables and wire-back chairs. Ice cream was sold in bulk and also by the dish; sandwiches were available. Wright Trucking were the biggest customers.



In 1933 Austin Fletcher bought the J.M. Fletcher property and set up the Red & White Store. It operated until 1958. Gas, lunch and groceries were on sale here. The old store piazza was removed when the W.P.A. put in sidewalk curbing during the Roosevelt administration.



When Ben Prescott left the so-called J.M. Fletcher Store in 1933 he rented the old abandoned store next to the library and carried the E.E. Gray Chain with him.



Miss Eva Fletcher, a most proper maiden lady, served as postmistress at the J.M. Fletcher Store in Westford Center. This photo, taken in 1895 finds Miss Eva decked out in her best finery.