

Diaries recall life on Westford farms in early 1900s

Life at Cold Spring Farm

BY MARIAN F. WINNEK
1883-1977



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUNE KENNEDY

Marian F. Winnek, great-granddaughter of J.V. Fletcher, donor of the J.V. Fletcher Library.

During his productive years in Belmont, my great-grandfather, J.V. Fletcher, still had a love in his heart for Westford. In 1872, at the age of 60, he purchased his family homestead and birthplace, the Cold Spring Farm, where his family spent the entire summer from 4th of July to Labor Day, and where he returned each weekend from Belmont. In the 1880s and 90s, three generations of his offspring, myself included, would board the wagon and drive down the sandy Cold Spring Road, continuing on about five miles of backroad to the Littleton Station to meet him...and our week's supply of 4-year-old Western beef he carried by hand from Faneuil Hall Marketplace. It was there that great-grandfather had made his fortune in the wholesome beef trade. The mist, the croaking meadow frogs and the "part-singing" as we drove home remain fixed in my memory.

I remember great-grandfather's large "saltbox" farmhouse could hold as many as 21 people. There was a cook, a second-maid, and someone to drive the horses, plus the farmer, whose ell was beyond the woodshed. Picture, if you will, on this 200-acre farm, some laying hens, grazing sheep, pedigreed cows, pigs, cornfields, berries and vegetables — even a rough nine-acre golf course.

A lovely pine grove extended down Cold Springs Road. Here in the middle of the 5 or 6 acres of pine, and close to the bubbling cold spring, was held the annual family picnic. Although the affair was 1/4 mile distance from the farmhouse, it was complete with trestle tables, chairs — no benches — white linen tablecloths and fine china. Oh, it was a merry occasion with a first rate Victorian meal!

In fact, the fare at J.V.'s home was always sumptuous, frequently offering six courses. Sometimes we'd shell a whole bushel of peas for one meal. The Bannister children down the road sold blueberries — three quarts for 25 cents. The cooks would make large juicy pies with a top crust. I remember that the person who took the last piece go the plate and the juice. There were lots of raspberries to eat, and vegetables — in season. I never could appreciate even the appearance of the pigs under the barn, but I do remember that great-grandfather's roasts from Boston were tasty treasures. You might like to know what a typical Sunday morning breakfast consisted of. I'll tell you:

A half orange eaten with a spoon, scrambled eggs, baked beans and toasted brown bread, deep-fried fish cakes, applesauce — 365 days a year — and coffee with cream skimmed from a 12-inch pan in blobs too heavy to pour. Why it's starvation today compared to those meals!

J.V. taught all the children, at an early age, to harness and drive the spanking Morgan horses. In the 1890s, he owned a 9-passenger "mountain wagon" in which we

made one annual trip to Long Sought For Pond for a picnic and swim, and one to the Groton Inn where the very idea of mince pie in midsummer was the lure. Here one could get a nice solid country meal.

Great-grandfather read his Bible every morning. Then, as he was an early riser, he assisted others in awakening by moving all the big rocking chairs around on the piazza, making considerable noise snapping the window shades to the top, and swatting flies with a newspaper. But J.V. loved a good time, too. I remember a gay party we had for some friend up town. In preparation, about 200 Japanese lanterns with candles were strung along the piazza and along the picket fence which surrounded the garden. It took a week to put them up. The whole house was alive to the sound of banjo, mandolin and guitar; the dancing was held on the large porch.

The water that we drank in the house was from the cold spring — and it was very cold! Another spring above the farm served the animals. With all those people in the house, there was but one bathroom for their use. The attraction here was the copper tub plated with tin. But with two doors to the room, one was not encouraged to stay long. I might add that J.V. had his own private, fancy toilet downstairs.

At the old home I remember the Franklin grates, the fireplaces and window seats. There were paneled shutters and large four poster beds. The year that J.V. presented the library to the town — it was dedicated in June of 1896 — he invited many friends to the affair. Being a meticulous man, he had the entire house stripped and completely redecorated, adding much charm with painted floors, Chinese straw matting, wallpaper and antique furniture. The outside was painted yellow-ochre. But on September 8, 1886, within a week after his return to Belmont for the winter, great-grandfather received a telegraph message stating that his Westford home had burned to the ground. Rumors were that the incentive for the fire was to cover the theft of the plumbing (the tin-plated copper tub and marble basin). It must have been a tremendous shock to the then 84-year-old man, but by the following summer, J.V. had a new house built on the same foundation — the present large home at the sharp bend in the road where Depot Street and Cold Spring Roads greet each other. The great barn did not burn. It was torn down in the 1960s and was still as square and sturdy as the day it was built 200 years ago.

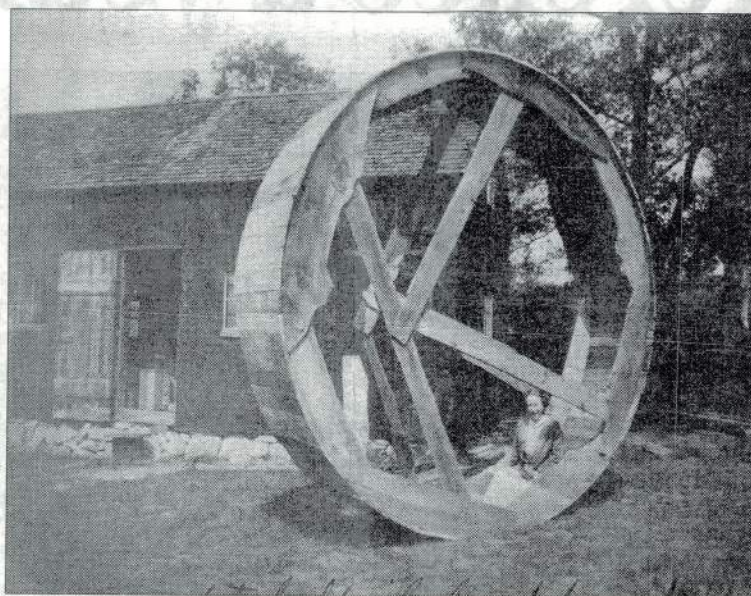


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DAY FAMILY

May E. Day, at the time 22, sits in a silo form at her grandparents' farm. She was the granddaughter of Emma and J. Warren Day.

In closing, I might say that J.V. was a sentimental man. He had wooden handled button hooks made from the tremendous elm which stood only five feet from the old home. The elm had been destroyed by the fire.

Thirty-five years later at the J. Warren Day Homestead

BY MAY E. DAY
1890-1973

Editor's note — Addie and Otis are the sister and brother of May E. Day.

Diary of July 1905: Uncle A. got a phonograph and we heard it through the telephone. I had to

build the fire. Had potatoes and codfish for breakfast again. Papa got up a quarter past four to get in the hay. I had to tramp the hay and then I went over to Graniteville with the team for Uncle Arthur to get some wood in. I did not wear a hat either time and I got sunburned. Half a pail of cream fell over in the ice-chest. Had Jell-O ice cream for breakfast. Good. Put the beans to soak this morning. I had to bake this afternoon because I forgot to make the batter yesterday. Grandma had to mould the white bread because I cut my finger when I was getting the pork for the beans. Got some

hay in from the further sheep-pasture in the dump cart. In the evening Grandma and I went for a ride — stopped at the library. Otis went to church to pump the organ. Cooked the ice cream for breakfast tomorrow. Cooked potatoes for pigs. I churned after. I got five lbs. 12 oz. — It was soft as putty. I put it down cellar for the night.

Diary — Feb. 1906: There is a musical at the hall. It is in the lecture course. I liked all but one part. It was a scene between a man and his wife.

Diary — August 1906: After supper went in sitting room and played string tricks. Had a nice time. Otis showed his coin trick. Addie played paper dolls...stuck cloves in apples...twins trying to make small kites.

Diary — August 1906: Got some fish and made guess cake, did the dishes, swept all three rooms, put some apple juice to straining — filled the lamps, gathered the sleeves of night dress, put two patches on my apron, ripped the sleeves of white waist. Got dinner — Mamma got 14 yards of linen — 6 and 1/4 ct. yard and I am going to have a dress of it.

Stopped at Aunt M. Held the baby. When Uncle Arthur got there he had a live lobster. They cooked the lobster he turned from green to red. They took the shell off. It was good.

Diary — September 1906: It's Saturday. Got up between 6:15 and 6:30 — carried Grandma to Pyne Ridge. She is going to South Berlin. Walked the horse home. Set the table...Sweet potatoes for breakfast. Went outdoors, ate some pears and read before Papa got home. Did the dishes, made my bed, dusted out front of my desk, made a guess cake, got 28 ears of corn and husked it for dinner. Boys got wood in forenoon. Otis went to Willow Station with pigeons and Albert to play ball but fellows didn't come so he came home. Swept sitting-room and kitchen. Mamma's making pickles. Addie picked some grapes and pears. Changed my dress, read some and stitched two tucks in shirt, binding on and hem in. Studied some. Cut some corn off for supper. Milk toast also. Addie carried milk to Uncle A's — no one at home.

— This is the fifth article in an ongoing series.

Westford
Recollections
MILLENNIUM SERIES
1729-
2000