

Johnson, Lamb: life on the farm was full of rural joy

BY JUNE KENNEDY
CORRESPONDENT

Correspondent June Kennedy compiled this article from a series of interviews she did in the 1970s.

Ruth Johnson (1900-1993)

"In 1910, when I was 10, my father bought the old Heywood Place up on the Chamberlain Road. With it came 60 acres. It cost him about \$2,000. The farmhouse had been remodeled in the 1870's. As

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was the style of the day, the central chimney and all the fireplaces were removed. The little panes of window glass were replaced by a bay window and larger glass. The original kitchen was pushed back

as a summer kitchen. We, of course, had the old wood stove in the house, but Mother moved into the summer kitchen when it got awfully hot. We did have a coal stove in the living room and wood stoves in some of the other rooms which we used in season. We had no facilities then in the house — our little out-house was at the end of the walk beyond the woodshed. It was cold out there!

"I remember my grandmother drying apples and stringing them for winter use — apple pies and dumplings. She also boiled her sap collected from the buckets of pine hung on the maple trees. That syrup was good! When Grandma came to live with us, she told Father she would cure the hams from his pigs. He made a simple contraption. It was like a big barrel with a cover on it. What she had to do was stay outside and tend the wood so that it would keep on smoking. Oh, she'd smoke those hams just right! After they were cured, we'd hang them in the attic — the ham and bacon. There are still hooks in my back pantry for hanging things on.

"Father, like many men had to be, was a jack of all trades. He kept

cows. I remember he built a watering trough for them and also and icehouse to keep his own ice. Father added to the orchards here and went into the apple business. Perley Wright would come right to our place and load the wagons with fruit. Then, with his team, he'd head for the Boston markets. My sister Edna, and I used to put the Colley-Woods Co. cards in the apple boxes.

"Oh, we didn't lack for something to do even if it wasn't play. Father had asthma so bad that quite often we girls had to milk the cows before heading for school. Mother made the butter some — not a lot. We had a small table churn that turned. I remember we always set the bread at night. And I mustn't forget the oil lamps. It was job every Saturday to clean them — a tedious affair!

"We were two miles from the center of town — had our own little neighborhood down here. I remember Wednesday Night Prayer Meetin' at the Walker Family's house. All the folks attended. In our own big kitchen here we had a lot of good times — Halloween parties, games, cards and square dancing. Ellis Cram and Henry Hildreth played fiddle. When my children were growing up we had an iron stove in the kitchen. It was a great clothes dryer! In winter, when mittens and outfits were soaked from all the coasting and the skating on MacMaster's Pond, we'd hang them on the stove and string a clothesline in front of it to catch the blazing heat. Then when the garments were dried, my children — and the neighbor's, could go out again. No two sets of clothing then! During World War II we all folded bandages and cloth. We did a lot of knitting for the Red Cross, with plenty of time for socializing too — I sure wish I could sample one of Aunt Cindy Prescott's molasses-ginger cookies right now! Yes, we really kept like a neighborhood down here."

Dorothy Garlick (1898-1995)

Josephine Lamb (1903-1997)

"At present, I, Josephine Lamb, am living at the old Burbeck Homestead down on Route 110 on Little-

ton Road. My sister, Dorothy and I, have happy memories here at the farm. We have an original deed to the first lands that Samuel Burbeck bought from Walter Baker of the Baker Chocolate Co. in Dorchester. In our possession is an old tax bill dated 1857. The poll tax at that time was \$1.50, Real Estate tax was \$5.60, and the Personal Estate tax \$1.40, but because they paid their \$8.50 on time, they got it for \$7.08. Try that today!

"Every winter we were given a load of wood and my father and I (Dorothy), would go out in the evenings and return in the old pung. It would be so beautiful. Not a bit of traffic on the road and the northern lights, I've never seen such a marvelous sight...and then arriving at the old silent house, the kitchen with one light turned low, a little hot drink and off to bed. I can remember climbing up the three steps (ladder, kind of), and getting into the feather bed. You'd practically sink out of sight. Later on there were some horsehair mattresses on the bed; originally, I guess they were made out of cornhusks. The bedrooms had a pungent odor, too. In those days clothes were stored with spices — all the furs, anything in wool. Recently, as we took out some of the old things to look them over, a regular shower of whole cloves descended upon us.

"Behind the stove in the kitchen was a small oven in the wall next to a bake oven. It was curtained off so that the cat could sleep in comfort there and not be disturbed. The pantry beyond there had more smells of food cooking — especially oatmeal cookies. At the back of the pantry was a hole in the floor probably 6 feet deep and it might have been 3-square with a dumb waiter on it that was pulleyed into the upper chambers. This was used as their refrigerator. It held a good deal, very cold.

"The parlor with its horsehair sofa was reserved for the minister and for the home funerals...but, out from the house we'll go to the back a little, where the so-called necessary was. The three seats — one for Dad, one for Mom, and one for the children — were, in winter, all carefully covered with a soft gray flannel for sheer comfort.

"Looking out the back window, the windmill was generally groaning and turning, pumping water that led into a large wooden cistern in the barn which fed the 25 or more cattle. As the winds would change, the windmill blades would indicate the direction of the wind. This was overlooking the gardens.

"Like every farm, it was self-sustaining. It had a 50-acre woodlot, a ten to twenty acre hay field, and the cranberry bog just across the pond where it was easily watered by a brook held back by a little dam. As children we were never allowed to play in the hay, or even to wander through a good hay field because they said it bruised the hay, and it wasn't good for the cows. If we watched them milking, we had to tiptoe in front or in back of the cattle so that they would not be disturbed. The only thing that made any move in the barn were the cats as they waited for a good squirt of



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LAMB FAMILY

In the 1970s sisters Josephine Lamb and Dorothy Garlick recalled their youth at the old Burbeck place on Littleton Road. The land is now owned by the Westford Regency Hotel. This photo was taken in 1939.

milk, fresh from the cow.

"In the old days the aunts, Mary and Grace, did all the work (the three brothers, William J., Fred and Eli, had moved to the city). I remember the aunts pitching hay so high, and herding cows on a bright old yellow-orange bicycle. One of the letters we kept told of one of the aunts picking 12 quarts of chestnuts. She made 72 cents — to her, quite a lot. Another treasured letter is one sent to this household during the Civil War, albeit the author soldier was not in sympathy with the "Cause."

"There were "interesting folk" in the family, too. Uncle Henry Harrison Burbeck operated a grist mill along with Mr. Heywood — down at the Depot (Westford) by the Brook (Stony). Uncle Henry was somewhat of a character. He had a glass eye which he never hesitated to haul out and polish regardless of company and conversation. Grandmother Burbeck received a citation for knitting so many articles for the soldiers during World War I. Uncle Eli Burbeck was the sole Westford survivor of Troop F Cavalry. This group never saw service, but it was simply an organization of the young bloods of the area. They gave a demonstration of drilling and horsemanship for the different towns. At one time when Troop F was reactivated at Fort Devens, the Commander came down, visited with Eli, and presented him with a helmet that had been used by the original Troop F."

— This article is the sixth in the continuing Westford Recollections Millennium Series



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LAMB FAMILY

Featured from left to right are Mary and Grace Burbeck. They worked on the old Burbeck farm pitching hay, as well as herding cows while riding a bright orange bicycle.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUNE KENNEDY

The neighbors of Chamberlain Corner in days gone by, from left, front Ruth Johnson, Ida Fletcher, Edna Moore, Susie Osgood, Mrs. Kidder and Mrs. Frank Bannister; back row Lucinda Prescott, two unknowns, Addie Parfitt, Cornelia Boynton, Mrs. Mark Jenkins and Mrs. Joseph Sargent.