

# Mentally unstable once piece of social pie

## Community kept 'crazies' close to home

By June W. Kennedy  
Staff Correspondent

*This is part of a series of recollections by Kate Hamlin (1847- 1937) about her youth in Westford, recorded late in life from her California home:*

**"B**eyond the wheelwright's shop rose what seemed almost a mountain — the loved Prospect Hill. How we enjoyed the walk over the double stone wall to the foot of the hill, and then the climb to the top, from which we had an unbroken view in all directions to the horizon.

"Before I left Westford the trees had grown to such height that the view was less satisfactory, but still inspiring and beautiful. (I have even been told that on a clear day the ships in Boston Harbor could be seen from Prospect Hill.)

"After one of those wonderful ice storms which leaves every tree, bush and twig encased in crystals, I went with friends early one morning to the top of Prospect Hill. Hardly had we arrived when the sun broke through a mist and, in an instant, the whole vista around us, in every direction to the horizon, sparkled with millions of diamonds, and the rays of the sun, penetrating them, produced all the colors of the rainbow. Never since have I seen so brilliant a world.

"A half mile beyond the wall leading to the hill stands, on a slight elevation from the road, an old house which, apparently, never knew the existence of paint and was black with age. [Present owners of this Hildreth Street homestead are Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Brady.]

"The door stands open, so without rapping, I enter and am met by a witchlike old woman, bent almost double, showing a few strands of grey hair flying at will about her head. She knows me and seems glad to see me. I am hoping to see



Staff photo by Jim Paiva

The restored Hildreth Street home of the Thomas Brady family once was the rundown abode of the mostly innocuous but locally notorious 'Crazy Amos'.

her son, Amos, but he does not appear; evidently he is sober, and then he is far from sociable. I make my call short, for there is little to attract me."

### Degenerate of good stock

"But Amos, what of him? Amos is one of the degenerates from good New England stock, a man who, when sober, remains at home whittling out bows and arrows and all sorts of household wooden implements. He is one of the last really skillful Yankee whittlers.

"But let Amos fill himself with hard cider or all the Jamaica rum he can hold and lo! Amos is no longer the solitary and quiet one; he becomes the life of the town. And some morning I hear unmelodious singing, and down the road, past the site of the old wheelwright's

shop and under the big elm, comes Amos, a gun over his shoulder, his hands filled with the whittled articles he has so long worked on, his little yellow dog trotting beside or behind him.

"'Happy' is no word to express his feelings. He is not drunk, as another would have been, with cider and rum; he is joyously crazy and is known, not only in his own, but in the surrounding towns, as 'Crazy Amos.' He sings and dances, plays with the boys, promises to make all sorts of toys, bows and arrows, doll furniture — any and everything asked for. For a few days, or possibly weeks, he is good-natured, kind and fond of playing jokes.

"At a time when the Millerites were looking forward to the end of the world and had their robes re-

ady, one midnight, Amos went through the village blowing vigorously on a large tin fish-horn. A family, living in the house at the rear of our garden, belonged to the sect, and their robes were ready.

"The wife, being awakened by the sound of the horn, thought the hour had come. She aroused her husband. The husband listened a moment and, being less gullible than his wife, said, 'Lie down, you fool. When Gabriel comes he won't come blowing no fish-horns.'

"Gradually, however, Amos changes, becomes cross, is impatient with the children, takes pleasure in frightening some lonely family, and is finally taken to a lock-up or jail, where he is kept until he is once more sober.

"Perhaps a year or more will pass

**'The mildly insane, often unhappy in their homes, were placed as boarders in some pleasant family where they often appeared perfectly normal.'**

before he is seen again. In his prison confinement he is not treated as a criminal — he has really done nothing to deserve punishment — he is retained simply as a precautionary measure, lest in his crazy condition he might do some harm.

"Years ago, more freedom was given to the mildly insane than is the custom now."

### Unsettled mind

"I remember a harmless man who wandered through numerous towns — I think his home was in Peppere-ll. The story regarding him was that in his youth he had experienced an unhappy love affair, the result of which was an unsettled mind.

"On his occasional visits to Westford he was adorned with ribbons and artificial flowers of all colors. He was kind and friendly and was specially attracted to my sister. Whether she reminded him of his lost love, I do not know. Perhaps she did.

"Later — and many in the village now living must remember him —

came 'Crazy David.' Poor man! Gentle and kind, yet, more or less suspicious of people. He always carried a tin pail in which he made his tea, for he would not accept any already made.

"Courteously, he would ask the lady of the house, 'Please, Marm, will you give me a little tea and let me boil some water on your stove?' He would ask for nothing else, but would gratefully accept a piece of pie or slice of bread and butter if offered him.

"His home was in Billerica and, wandering about as he did, was a grief to his family; but if restrained, he was most restless and unhappy.

"It may be of interest to dwell for a moment on the care of those unfortunates who were mentally unbalanced but not dangerously insane. As asylums for that class were not the well-managed institutions of the present day, the mildly insane, often unhappy in their homes, were placed as boarders in some pleasant family where they often appeared perfectly normal.

"A relative of Ralph Waldo Emerson, an aunt, I believe, was thus a boarder in the home of my father's cousin, Dr. Cyrus Hamlin, when he was a boy in school. Dr. Hamlin told me of her kind and loving influence in the family, and of the help she gave the children in their studies. He remembered her with sincere affection."

*June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.*

## Register new students next month

Registration for new students in all grades will be held at: Westford Academy (grades 9-12), Tuesday, Aug. 28, through Friday, Aug. 31, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Abbot and Norman E. Day middle schools (grades 6-8), Wednesday, Aug. 29, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Cameron/Frost (at Cameron), Nabnasset and Robinson elementary schools (grades K-5), Wednesday, Aug. 14, 9 a.m. to noon.

Children entering kindergarten next fall must be five years old by Aug. 31. Parents should bring a child's birth certificate and immunization record when registering.