

# Oldtimers share memories of Westford Thanksgiving past

"Over the river and  
through the wood-  
Oh, how the wind does  
blow!

It stings the toes  
And bites the nose  
As over the ground we  
go.

Over the river and  
through the wood,  
Trot fast, my dapple-  
gray!

Spring over the ground.  
Like a hunting hound!  
For this is  
Thanksgiving Day."

— *Child*



BUNDLED AGAINST THE cold, Charles W. Hildreth arrives by horsedrawn buggy at the Boston Road home of his son, Charles L. Hildreth. The turn-of-the century photo illustrates the popular Thanksgiving song, with its references to the wind stinging toes and biting noses.

(Photo courtesy of June Kennedy)

Millions of Americans are grateful to Norman Rockwell for leaving them a nostalgic portrayal of small town life. Reassuringly and pleasantly he illustrated a culture of rural ways which our fast-moving nation is leaving behind.

Ten years ago, just a few days after Rockwell's death, I visited the Corner House in Stockbridge, Mass., which presently contains his original works. As I reflected upon his paintings of "Freedom from Want" and "Freedom of Worship", my thoughts turned to Westford and some old-timers here who in their own way painted a picture of our town which might be titled "Thanksgiving Past". I share with you my findings:

Emma M. Day and husband, J. Warren Day, lived at the old farmhouse located at the junction of Graniteville and Cold Spring roads. She was a 26-year-old housewife when she penned in her diary:

"Tues. 24 Nov. 1868: I have made my pudding for Thanksgiving and may I have a thankful heart. Wed. 25 Nov. 1868: Got a turkey.

Thurs. 26 Nov 1868: Rainy - W. (Warren) and Mother went to church. S and I tended Turkey while they was gone, it was nice."

Another entry written a year later shows the folksy hospitality extended the traveling "pedler". No matter that the calendar marked Thanksgiving.

"Wed. Nov. 17 1869: The pedler staid here tonight.

Thurs. Nov. 18 1869: Thanksgiving Day Mother took 3 hand-

kerchiefs 40 cents each We had three chickens and all the fixings for dinner."

Marian Winnek (1883-1977), great granddaughter of J. Varnum Fletcher, donor of the Westford library, told many tales of her childhood visits to his old homestead, Cold Spring Farm, located at the sharp bend in the road where Cold Spring Road and Depot Street greet each other.

Born here in 1812, J.V. Fletcher was sentimental about the homestead. Accordingly, when he was 60, he purchased his birthplace where his family spent the entire summer from 4th of July to Labor Day. Mr. Fletcher, himself, returned each weekend from Belmont to his self-sustaining 200-acre farm. Many a six-course meal was served at Cold Spring Farm.

Although the holiday meal was probably enjoyed at the Belmont home, Miss Winnek recalled that a typical Fletcher Thanksgiving menu of the 1880s and 1890s would consist of:

"Soup, consomme, fish baked in a scallop shell, turkey, 3 or 4 vegetables (hubbard squash and creamed onions), pan-roasted potatoes, biscuits, pies (mince, squash with brandy and rose water, latticed cranberry pie), nuts and raisins, fruit (apples and pears he raised himself), all served on the lovely Royal Worcester dinner set which had been taken from the china cupboard and washed for the occasion."

By 1905, when May E. Day, granddaughter of Emma M. Day, was a girl of 14, she wrote in her diary: "Thanksgiving - Papa didn't go to bed. He and Uncle Arthur worked at the telephone."

The Day Family had one of the first Westford phones. May's brother, Otis, still recalls the chilly day the lines were laid from the mills up to Westford (probably the Depot). The Day phone, a private one, was hooked to this line.

Frank Jarvis grew up in Parker Village in the early years of this century. He recalls: "Thanksgiving found our table loaded with home-cooked foods. We looked up to those who had turkey as wealthy! We had chicken. Cracker pudding was a favorite dessert, especially with me."

Finally, Ruth Johnson remembers Thanksgiving Day in the teens as a big family time: "We had seven to eight kinds of pie at our house on the Chamberlin Road. It seems fitting to share a couple of old-time recipes that were favorites here in Westford.

**Cracker Pudding** — about 12 common crackers; 1 cup sugar; 1 tsp. salt; 1 cup raisins; 1 egg; 1 tsp. cinnamon; 3 pints milk. Bake in oven till firm. Stir once or twice. *Emma M. Day, 1871*

**Miss Parloa's Squash Pie** - 2 pints squash; 2 qts. boiling milk; 1½ nutmegs; 4 tsp. salt; 5 cups sugar; 9 eggs; 4 Tbls. Madeira; 2 Tbls. rose water; pastry for 8 pies. a favorite of J.V. Fletcher, from *Miss Parloa's Cookbook 1880 edition*.

"Over the river and through the wood,  
Now grandmother's cap I spy!  
Hurrah for the fun!  
Is the pudding done?  
Hurrah for the pumpkin pie!

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