

Voice of the people

Recalling good life on Burbeck farm

By June W. Kennedy

The old Burbeck Homestead down on the Littleton Road is situated at the entrance of the Westford Regency Inn.

In the 1970's, two sisters Dorothy Garlick and Josephine Lamb shared happy memories of life there on the family 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 \$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 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 of cornhusks.

"The bedrooms had a pungent odor, too. In those days clothes were stored in 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' deep and it might have been 3' square with a dumb waiter on it that was pulleyed up through 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.



THE BURBECK FAMILY set up its homestead in the early 1800's on land purchased from the Baker Chocolate Company of Dorchester. There they lived the good, simple life on wooded land blessed with a pond, brook and cranberry bog. The farm building now graces the entry to the Westford Regency Inn on Littleton Road. Photo courtesy "Westford Recollections")

"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 growing 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 20-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 milk, fresh from the cow.

"In the old days the aunts, Mary and Grace, did all the work (the three brothers 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¢ — 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.

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and the author of "Westford Recollections", a series of vignettes and photos depicting a simpler time in the town's history.