

Westford Recollections

We saved a cellar hole Part II

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

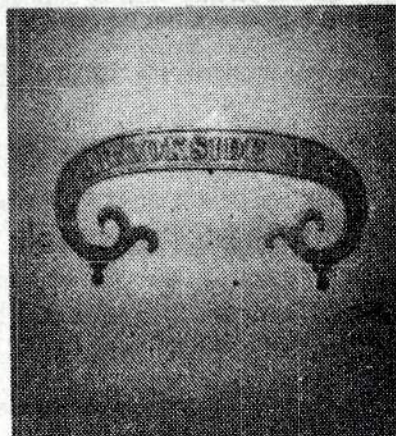
Ben Prescott and Edmund Whitney:

"Dan Sheehan's Cider Mill was located on the Old Coach Road to Salem. The foundation may still be seen between Lowell Road and Stony Brook Road. People brought in apples; Dan pressed them and sold cider and vinegar. A jolly fellow, he always shared a tin cupful of his cider with a dozen or fifteen of us as we passed by at noon or night on the way to and from the Stony Brook District School.

"One day, it must have been around 1905, we looked out the school window and down over the hill. Dan Sheehan's Cider Mill was afire. We big boys ran down. Dan was weaving burlap (used for straining cider) on his loom and had fallen asleep. Well, that fire was put out with vinegar. He hooked a hose to the tank of vinegar, pumped it by hand and put out the fire with that vinegar. That's really true!"

Tom Curley:

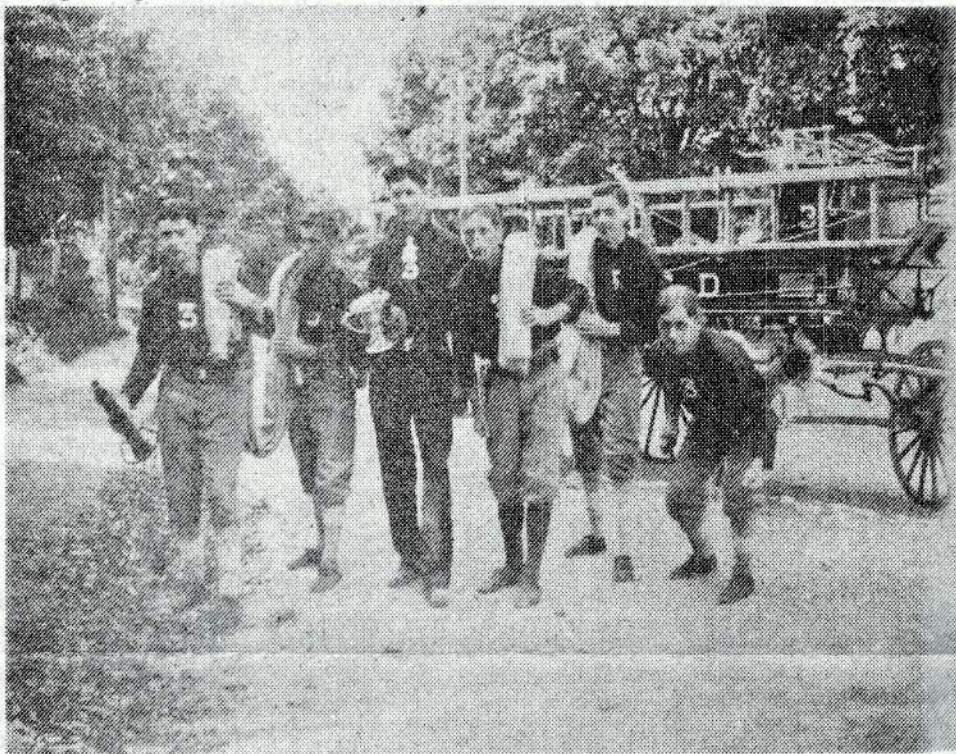
"I remember the girl came running, hollering, 'barn afire!' It was Mr. Colburn's at the corner of Flagg and Robinson Roads. I dropped the traces on two horses, tied one to the fence, hitched the other to the wagon, and took the milk pails. There was nothing to fight fires with. People had water lines - passed the pails from one person to another. We almost had it until the wells went dry. The 70-foot-long barn burned to the ground as did the little attached house. We saved the house across the street. The cows were taken to the empty stanchions at Dave Scott's on the Forge Village Road."



This brass plaque is the last trace of the Brookside No. 2 hand-pulled hose cart. (A Pehrson photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

Walter Fletcher, Sr. and George Perkins:

"Oscar Spalding was a big lumberman. One summer he went in and cut a woodlot at the East Boston Camps by Burgess Pond. He stacked it out in a field right by the Westford Railroad Depot. A spark from a passing train set fire to one of the piles. That whole field went up in lumber. You'd see boards in the sky; the flames and heat would pick them up and carry them. Those boards would land back in the trees and all



Hose Company No. 3 sports the trophy for one of the events at the annual Muster Day in Westford in the early days of the century. Note the horse-drawn fire wagon. (A Healy photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

Austin Fletcher:

"The Butterfield Tavern, later belonging to the Abbot Family, was located between the Wright & Fletcher Store and Meeting House, on the site of Connell Drive. The Ed ("Pete") Fisher family lived there the night it burned back in February of 1914. His own brother, Alec, a volunteer fireman, slept right through the fire. It was the coldest night - 22 below zero. "When the horse-drawn wagon arrived with pails, the men began trying to put out the fire. A lot of water got splashed on their clothes and the wind was blowing so that the firemen were instantly covered with an armor of ice. Only the ell was saved."

around. All the men did was fight the fire spreading from that fire. You had to keep running and putting it out where it landed. Dry lumber burning is pretty hot stuff! The horse-drawn fire pumper came out from Lowell. With that run from Prescott Street in Lowell to Westford, the horses got pretty tired. At that, the water really didn't amount to nothin'. The fire just had to burn itself out."

Bernard Wilder:

"One late December afternoon in 1933, with the temperature registering 29° below zero, Town Fire Warden and neighbor, stopped by in his old Buick, a 1918 touring car. He told us that the Judson Sweetser house was on fire. This huge set

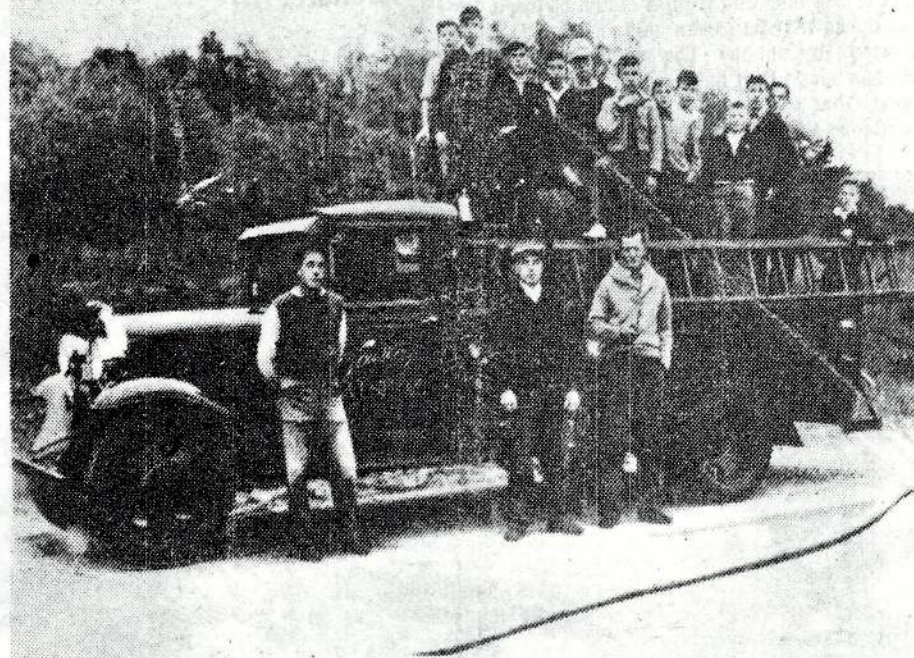
of beautiful buildings set atop Bear Hill. All hands got into Harry's old car and up we went. We were the first to arrive. Only the living room was ablaze, resulting from a faulty fireplace. Mr. Nesmith took complete charge, telling us to get all the furniture out of the house, the animals and rolling stock out of the barn, and to keep that living room shut tight. Knowing, of course, that in minutes the fire trucks would arrive and have the fire out in no time, my brother George and I went into the kitchen to man the hand pump in the sink and fill some pails with water, should the living room door burn through into the hall. The only pail we could find was filled to the top with eggs, just collected, I suppose. Seems funny now, but we argued several minutes as to how quickly to empty the pail and not break the eggs. How stupid! Finally, George told me to open the back door. He threw the whole lot out into the snowbank.

"Well, the fireman did come from all sections of Westford, Littleton, and Carlisle. Manpower galore, but not one drop of water! Every

burning trains going through the woods in all sections of town. I must confess, sometimes Harry's sons and I would leave a few stumps smoking at the end of the day so that when Mr. Nesmith came to check on us he'd say, "Well, I guess we'd better come back tomorrow boys. Oh, boy! Another 50 cents times eight hours!"

Ben Prescott:

I can remember one Saturday night when I was running the store beside the library. On Saturday we'd stay open till 9 o'clock or maybe even later. Well, this particular evening I had closed up and was doing the bookkeeping; the desk was out in the back. After about half an hour, maybe more, I had to go to the front end of the store to check the cash register. When I did, I saw a glare of light reflecting on the windows in that building across the street. I couldn't for the life of me, understand what it was all about. I rushed to the door, unlocked it, and looked out. The house next to me was all ablaze. I went back in the store, cranked up the old telephone and got the operator. I told her, "Call the Fire Depart-



Volunteers for a Junior Fire Department in town first appeared in the Forge Village Company. First class training was given to thirteen and fourteen year olds. This 1930's photo features the youth aboard the truck. Standing from l-r: Joseph Lefebvre, Reginald Blowey, captain and Ed Rogers, Chief. (A Blowey photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

chemical extinguisher and tank was frozen solid. Even the pump sent to the foot of the hill was frozen. Boy, it was cold! Needless to say, with the yard crowded with willing men, the fire spread from room to room, completely engulfing the house. The fire, of course, spread to the barn. We pelted that barn with showballs to try to put out the sparks. No use.

"Equipment in this case didn't matter, but looking back, it does seem pretty puny now. Each section of Westford had a Model T Ford Chemical Truck; Brookside had only a hand-pulled hosecart. Parker Village, sure we had a fire house. Adjacent to the Parkerville School was a building 6 feet wide and 40 feet long containing a few chemical fire extinguishers and several long ladders. I never recall it being used.

"I remember Mr. Nesmith taking me with him and his sons to help put out forest fires. Our job was not so much in putting out the fire, but to watch the burned area to see that it was completely out, and stayed out. Big fires such as those down in the Texas area or over north in the quarries lasted for days. And, at 55 cents an hour, boy, I thought I was going to be rich! Many of these fires were caused by numerous coal

ment, and get 'em out as fast as they can, Mr. Seavey's house is all afire." Well, I was on the Fire Department then - as a Call Man, so I just locked the door again and ran over across the street by the hydrant and waited for the fire truck to come. They came shortly, but not much help. They stopped at the hydrant. I grabbed the wrench and pulled up the hose to hook it to the hydrant, and then stood there waiting for them to lay the hose to the fire, get the nozzle connected and hollar. And they hollared "water!" I turned the hydrant on and the water by me came out of the hydrant. I knew that by the way the hose acted. And then they kept hollaring, "water, water, water!" Come to find out, the hose couplings, two or three links down from where I had hooked it on to the hydrant, weren't screwed up tight enough. The hose pulled apart there so they weren't getting any water on the fire anyway. I think if that hadn't happened they could have saved that house. That's one of the times we saved a cellar hole!"