

Westford Recollections

by June W. Kennedy

Westford Academy Part III

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

We Were There!

In 1897 the second Academy building in Westford opened its doors. What were school days really like in the early years of this century? What were the joys and sorrows of the students? The following tales were shared by those who were there!

The Academy schoolhouse was still shiny and new when Alice Prescott Collins entered its portals in 1901. She recalls, "When I was through with my schooling here in Forge Village, I went up to the Westford Academy. I didn't have to walk then. I had a horse - a horse named Yankee. He'd been a race horse and had never been used to having any woman near him. He used to show his teeth, and I was afraid he'd bite me so once I slapped his face and he never did it again. We became fast friends. Before classes began I'd put Yankee in a nearby barn - my father had made negotiations or something. At noon I'd go over and put his feedbag on and go back to class...sometimes I didn't have very much time for my own lunch. At the close of the day Yankee and I went hme together. In 1905, the year I graduated, there were seven girls in my class. Four had taken the four year Latin course; three had taken the three year English course. I attended the Lowell Normal School following graduation."

Miss Lucinda Prescott entered the Academy in 1904. "There were two teachers in the high school...see what they have now! If we had five in the class, that was a lot. There were four in ours when I graduated. I took the English course so as to get out quickest...only a three years project. I still have the book we used when we studied and pressed wild flowers. I imagine they are pretty well curled up now."

"Somehow I knew the day the 'Jolly Jumper,' our nickname for the electric car that ran from Brookside to Westford Center, would make its first run. I was looking out the high school window. Mr. Perkins, the principal, questioned me. 'What are you looking at? Why didn't you tell us? We'd all have gone.'"

"Our class of 1907 was the last one to hold exercises in the upstairs of the Unitarian Church. The next year they held them in the Town Hall. The Alumni had a graduation ball and dinner right after graduation and that was in the Town Hall. It was free to graduates. Then you were supposed to sign the book and become an alumni. Come to think of it, I'm the only one left." Lucinda Prescott died in March of 1976.

"I went to the eighth grade at the Academy when I was twelve years old," recalls Otis Day. I had long pants on for the first time - and of course we walked to school - no buses. Heavens alive, if these folks today walked to school, they wouldn't have so much ambition to get in the Dickens."

But boys will be boys! Otis continues, "We had a teacher in the 8th and 9th grade - Ellery Newcomb. We were in one room. First day of school she announced, 'We're here for business, not for pleasure!' and that's what she was, I guess. Our motto for that year was:

Hippity Huss
Hippity Hus
What in the world is the matter with us?
Nothing at all, nothing at all,
Newcomb trained us, that's all.

"If kids did something in a hurry she'd always say, 'Haste makes waste.' One morning I was late. She wondered why I was late. I said haste makes waste, so I didn't hurry. Well, I lost my recess!"

"I liked football, baseball and basketball. We used to play indoor football in the gymnasium with a basketball...no rules - no nothin'. We had

two teams and we'd play on the top third floor. It was a terrible place. You'd bump your head and the ball would jam into the corners, but that's all we had. We called it indoor football. Other than that we were angels."

In her diary dated November 30, 1904, May Day pens: "This morning about nine o'clock, those that were downstairs heard a loud thud and then the girls came running. It was Mr. Frost. He had fallen out of his chair and the doctor said he died instantly. There will be no more school this week." Sunday, December 4: "Mr. Frost's funeral was today. All the scholars went down to Miss Thompson's and marched up to the church. It lasted a long time."

The next principal of Westford Academy was Mr. Perkins who arrived in early January of 1905. He introduced Astronomy to the Academy. "He really made it interesting," remembers Otis Day. "He'd take three or four of us over to Hildreth Street in the evening to point out the constellations. Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Scorpius, Sagittarius, Aquarius, Orion, Libra, Capricorn, Pisces - oh boy, I've forgotten them all! What a thrill to go out in the evening with the horse and bob sled. The sky was always so clear."

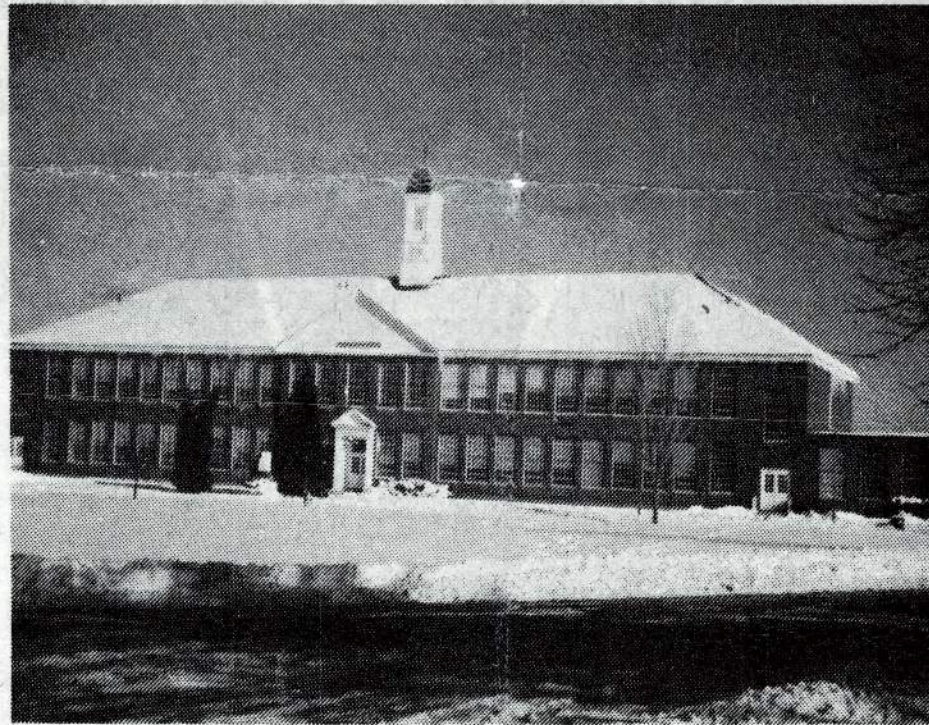
As the fall term began in September of 1905 there were twenty-four scholars: ten boys and fourteen girls. From May Day's notes, one detects that German was new to the curriculum. "First period had German. Arthur Hildreth and I take it. There is only one Grammar for the three of us. It is one Miss Thompson used at college. Today I sat in the chair, and Miss Thompson stood behind us. Pronounced alphabet and some words."

"Mr. Perkins said we weren't going through the four books in Caesar, but only three because we could get more out of it. I am going to read the fourth book outside because I want to go to college."

Ruth Johnson graduated from the Academy in 1919. "When we got to high school we used to walk all the way up from Chamberlain's Corner. In high school, you know, they'd be dances or something and we'd walk back again at night in



The second Westford Academy building was still shiny and new when Alice Prescott Collins enrolled in 1901. She claims, "I didn't have to walk from Forge Village. I had a horse named Yankee. Before classes began I'd put Yankee in a nearby barn. At noon I'd go over and put his feedbag on. . . sometimes I didn't have very much time for my own lunch." (A Seavey photo from the Westford Recollections series)



The third Westford Academy building was renamed Abbot Middle School. Its library, ball park and first band instruments were gifts of the Abbots. (From the Westford Recollections series)

the moonlight. Isn't it strange how much less fear there was in those days. I don't think we had any for there was nothing to be afraid of then. Yes, I'd even walk by the cemetery (Fairview). I'm used to that cemetery for that's where my husband and I did part of our courting. He worked there for the Greig's till he was eighteen or twenty. When I came home from school, he'd be waiting for me out there on the stone wall."

"All of my children and three of my grandchildren have graduated from the Academy. Not many families can boast that today. There were four in my class. Exercises were held in the Town Hall in the afternoon, I think. I walked up to my graduation. I had to be early. On my way up Mr. Mark Jenkins who ran the blacksmith shop at Chamberlains Corner - he came out and handed me a bouquet of moss roses. I'll never forget that. I was so pleased and they were so beautiful. It's sometimes the little things that one remembers, I think."

"My first year of high school, Mr. Roudenbush took us on a trip to Boston to view historical places. The English teacher took us down (to Boston) one time to see 'MacBeth,' probably by train from the Depot."

"We did have a basketball team - the girls did the first year I was there. Miss Moreland was the coach. But that was the last year because they had no other teacher that was coach material - so we didn't have a team after that. Gym suits had bloomers with a long blouse with a sailor-like tie. I remember we played against Littleton. I thought Edith Lawrence was the most wonderful English teacher - and there wasn't anyone like Mr. Roudenbush."

Declamations seem to have been an integral part of the curriculum at the Academy. May Day frequently refers to these recitations. From her April 13, 1906 Diary: "I declaimed 'Bruce and the Spider.' One place I nearly missed, but didn't."

"Happy New Year. School begins today," May

records in her Diary dated January 1, 1905. Other holidays received attention: February 12, 1906: "We got out at noon because it was Lincoln's Birthday. Had the Gettysburg speech. Mr. Perkins read the Governor's Proclamation and the Emancipation Proclamation and 'My Captain' by Walt Whitman."

"April 19, 1906: No school today because it is the anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord. Hooked and churned."

"May, 1906: Miss Thompson gave me a chocolate she got in her May Basket. Addie and Anna went to hand a May basket to Miss Newcomb."

"No school today. Washington's birthday."

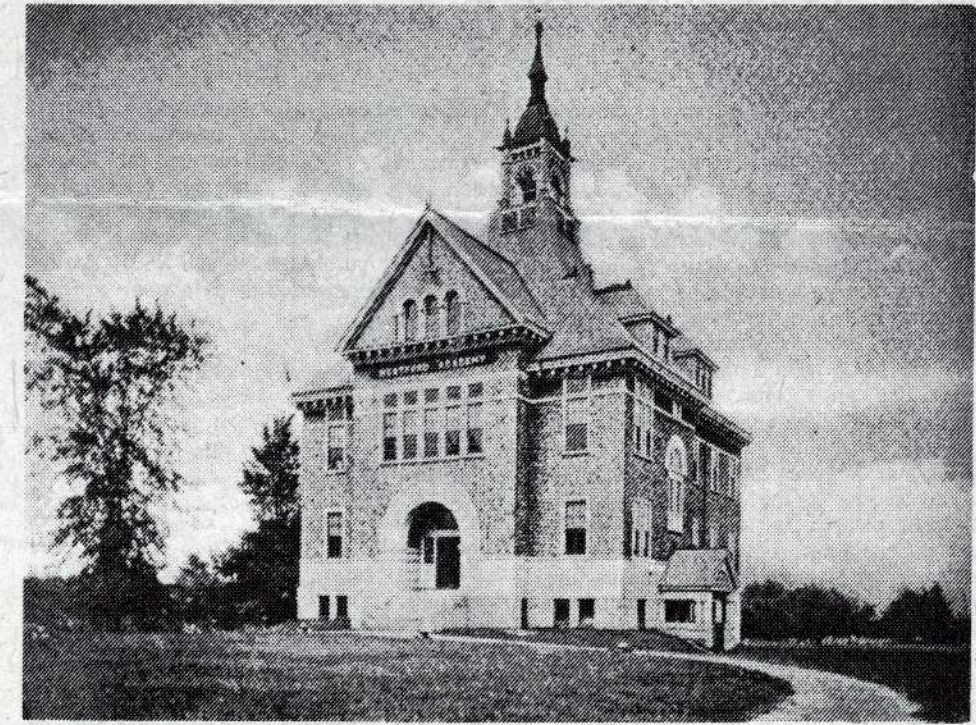
In January, 1907 she reports: "It was 4 degrees when I started to school. Cold in Mr. Perkins room - 48 degrees when I got there. Some boys had overcoats on."

Austin Fletcher relates: "I was in the bookkeeping class one time and a fellow by the name of Theodore Park, he did something wrong - he was a wise guy. Miss Young got after him for what he'd done. He just looked at her. You know, he could wiggle his ears just like a horse. Well, he wiggled them! She turned red and sent him to Mr. Roudenbush. He never came to class or school again...Never saw anyone could wiggle his ears like that."

"Really had discipline then boy, - I'm telling you. I remember a fellow running down the stairs and Mr. Roudenbush saw him. 'Go back upstairs and when you come back down walk!' he commanded. A good teacher, but strict."

Mr. Frank Jarvis who attended the Academy from 1920-1924 offers the following description of his schooldays: "At the time there were three women and one man who taught. The building was heated by hot air, yet it was still so cold during the winter months that the gym upstairs had to be closed. Baseball and basketball competitions were held, and scrub soccer was a favorite game."

"In 1924, there were fifteen or sixteen



From 1897 until 1955 Westford Academy was housed in the present Roudenbush Community Center. (A Day photo from the Westford Recollections)

graduates and the graduation ceremony was held upstairs in the Town Hall. The Senior Class had a play. In the spring the Class took a two-day trip to the Mohawk Trail - in five or six autos. We truly thought that we were world-wide travelers!"

The second Academy building was renamed the William C. Roudenbush School after its principal of twenty-five years, when, in 1955, the third Westford Academy building was erected. While the second one served the town for a period of fifty-eight years, the third building was able to accommodate the expanding Academy enrollments for only an eighteen year span. During these years the population of Westford had just about doubled. Thus, it was, albeit with some opposition, the fourth and present Westford Academy structure was designed. In September of 1973 its doors were opened.

Recognition has been given two of the original subscribers of Westford Academy. The third Academy building was renamed Abbot Middle School. Its library, ball park and first band instruments and uniforms were gifts of the Abbot Worsted Company. The present Westford Academy library was named in honor of Zachaeus Wright.

So much for days at Westford Academy!

This is article No. 27 in the continuing WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS - 250th Anniversary Series.