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Folklore Wisdom: Good Advice – Good Humor (2/2003)

I consider myself fortunate to have spent a major portion of my formative years in the presence of old folks that have been in the presence of old folks before them. This is an experience that is not likely to be shared by young people today. The folks I refer to lived in hard times and they needed the guidance of catchy sayings that were repeated daily like incantations. Failure to heed the advice meant hardship, even death. On the other side of life were sayings that added humorous seasoning to discourse among folks wherever they happened to gather. Once aired by the originator, sayings meant as a joke, insult, or advice, were repeated by others until those local characters were colored more by what they said than what they did.

Some of the anecdotes my grandfather used when I was with him at the age of 8 to 10 have stuck in my head, which was the point of his exclamations. I remember him saying at the beginning of a project on the farm, perhaps directed at my father, “always work towards the barn.” I have since learned that axiom was good advice during those times and too, for these times. Anyone who works with horses knows that a team will always pull a heavy load more willingly if they are moving toward the barn than they would going away from the barn. Consequently Dad always started loading the hayrack at the far end of the field so the animals would not have to haul the loaded wagon as far and so they would always be hauling the heavy load with the barn in view...visions of the grain bucket coming to mind. Today, while at work in the field and forest, I find myself repeating this mantra to save energy and increase efficiency-it works.

Grandpa had another saying that I have not figured out to this day, but because he employed many workers and used many horses in his life as a sawmill owner and operator, I believed it must be important. His often repeated saying was, “a fartin’ horse will never tire; a fartin’ man is the man to hire.” The prologue to this statement would usually be a loud one followed by hearty laughter. Then he would repeat the saying for the benefit of anyone in his presence, and perhaps to minimize his indecency. I have never found the answer to my questions; how does the expulsion of gas prevent a horse from tiring and how does it make a person fit for employment?

If Grandma was nearby she would chew out Grandpa by saying, “Perley...little pitchers have big ears.” Because I have seen this saying in print, I believe it cannot be attributed to Grandma even though she had occasion to use it a lot when I was visiting. Of course when I heard her say that I just listened to Grandpa more attentively. This saying is commonly used to caution people not to use vulgar language in the presence of youngsters.

Grandmother and grandfather frequently repeated the common saying, “make do or do without”. The saying worked for them because by fixing and mending they saved lots of money and made their life more comfortable. Today, I think anyone who says it would be considered anti-American. Following this advice would ruin our economy. This saying surely cannot be attributed to my family because it is so widespread. This is true with another saying of farmers, including my ancestors, “make hay while the sun shines.” The advice was to cut grass only when two to three days of dry weather are predicted, otherwise rain could spoil the hay. The meaning of this adage has been expanded to the general advice “to act while conditions are favorable”.

Recently, Rhoda Clark shared some pithy sayings, passed on to me with the intervention of her son, Binney. She recalled advice overheard while helping the hired men with spring planting. They counted out the seeds dropped by affirming, “one for the crow, one for the cutworm, one to rot, and one to grow.” I know from experience this is sound advice. In olden times this axiom must have meant the difference between hunger and plenty during the long winters on the farm. Rhoda also recalled advice given by Mr. Pratt, who tended the stables for her parents in the 1930’s, on how to judge a horse. The saying goes: “one white foot, buy him; two white feet, try him; three white feet, deny him; four white feet and snip on his nose, take off his hide and feed him to the crows.” Perhaps some readers that know horses can tell me if there is any wisdom in this last saying.

From another side of early life came sayings meant to insult those being a bit different, or to entertain in a time when little other source of humor existed. My neighbor, Gordon Russell, was as fortunate as I in spending time with grandfathers and in his unique case, a great-grandfather. He “mined his memory” and recalled hearing his great-grandfather, Horace Chase, spin yarns about the barn, and house raisings, when after a good day’s work, “everybody would go home a little ‘shiny’.” The word, ‘shiny’ was used to describe someone who had tumbled a few too many mugs of hard cider.

Gordon offered more sayings that were often repeated as entertainment by old folks around the ‘Old Hotel’ in North Weare. His great-grandfather, when asked what he’d done during the day, was fond of entertaining his friends by saying, “Well, I sat all day and never thought of nothin’.” Gordon noted another saying repeated by his great-grandmother every time he would give up on a task. “Stick tew, Fidelia, stick tew.” This inspiring saying, according to Gordon, can be attributed to an old townsman who often stayed too long at the tavern. He had become too ‘shiny’ to mount his horse and as he leaned against the old mare to gain a degree of sobriety he repeated, “Stick tew, Fidelia, stick tew.” The horse ‘stuck tew’ by standing there until her owner could regain the saddle.

The other day I was privileged to sit with Leon Taylor and laugh over a collection of folklore that he has journaled over the years. Leon, a renowned storyteller in his own right, is another of the fortunate few to have been in the presence of other older storytellers and he enjoys passing along the stories he heard. The following are some of his collection that I find humorous. He admits that some of the humor was originally meant to insult people, but because they have been repeated so often and because the persons meant to be insulted are long gone, only humor prevails. He said that the intelligence of some folks in town has been described by sayings such as: “number than Kelly’s geese that swam three rivers to get a drink;” “don’t know more than the law requires;” “he couldn’t find his ass with a search warrant;” “didn’t know enough to pour pee out of a boot with directions on the heel and a faucet on the toe.”

Casually, Leon interjected one-liners he remembers hearing and that he repeats to draw laughter. One of his friends told him when asked how his date was the previous night, “she was like muggin’ up to a mailbox.” He went on through his list and offered a couple that describe appearances of certain people in town. “She had a face like a handful of worms.” “She is about like a cross between a graham cracker and a toenail.”

“Long ago the country store sold molasses by the ‘glug’,” said Leon. He explained that the storekeeper kept the molasses in a large jug with a narrow opening and when tipped a ‘glug’ noise resulted. “By the way, 2003 *“In the Country”* by Robert Todd

Bob, do you know the difference between molasses and a clothesline?" said Leon. I fell for it and with a chuckle he educated me, "one draws flies, the other flies draws."

He read from another category of sayings in his list ... descriptions of how hot it gets in the summer. One of the silliest descriptions was, "hotter than a hen hauling hay with a two horse rack (wagon)."

As I close this piece I want to thank Gordon, Leon, and Rhoda for sharing some of their folklore wisdom with us. I believe that wisdom comes from early settlers in this area who, being faced with particular challenges, adopted sayings that strengthened their faith and perseverance. Subsequent to the settlement era, people were able to enjoy life a little and the sayings they passed on served more as entertainment. Will sayings by myself and by my cohorts be the folklore of the future? No, ... we will pass on the old sayings with a whole new meaning. Well, keep your powder dry, or grin and bear it.

IMPORTANCE OF OUR TOWN FOREST (3/2003)

U.S. Forest Service authorities are revising the management plan for the White Mountain National Forest. Their approach to the process is commendable in that it is "bottom up, rather than top down"; they are asking the public stakeholders, true owners of the land, what they want from the forest. One approach used by the Forest Service to gather public sentiment was by conducting a public opinion poll. Another organization in this state also conducted a similar study to validate the findings of the Forest Service.

Recently, I attended a conference where the results of the two polls were presented. I was not flabbergasted to hear comments of residents from all of New England, but was surprised by the ranking of their sentiments. In listening, though, my mind wandered from the meeting and became engulfed with thoughts about public lands in New Boston. The issues and sentiments presented at the meeting are the same ones I have heard for several years at public meetings downtown. Since such deep feelings will influence land use on Federal lands in New Hampshire, why would they not be just as relevant to the use of our town forest?

Do the following clips from the quotes I heard hit hot buttons in your consciousness? "The biggest threat to our forests are sprawl and development ... need to limit development and human activity ... need places to protect and enjoy ... forests are healthy, relaxing places ... an economic resource ... preserve the wild ... protect the health and quality of the forest for future generations ... opportunity to connect with the natural environment ... forests are spiritual places ... wildlife habitats ... recreational opportunities ... just to know they are there." These sentiments seem to predominate in the minds of our times and in our places.

Although I share some of the same feelings expressed by members of the general public, my background and training sets me apart from the public in ranking the importance of values provided by the forest. The poll respondents ranked forest values in descending order of public importance with aesthetics foremost, ecology second, recreation third, and economics last in favor. In contrast, my bias is to consider statistics of tree growth rates, species value, and stand density with an eye for maximizing revenue from the harvest of timber. I am also tuned into the revenues poured into our economy from shipments of wood product manufacturing and from payments into the economy by people recreating on forestland. I get really hyped by the fact that the sum of the revenue streams attributed to the forest in New Hampshire amounts to \$421 per acre per year.

Alas, I am coming to accept the demanding voice of society and the convincing images of cultural change. I realize that revenues from timber and wood product manufacturing are amounting to a smaller percentage of the \$421 stated above. And, recreation dollars are amounting to more of that figure. Soon planners will add to the mix the value of biological diversity, the value of clean water, the value of clean air, the value of air temperature moderation, and the value of aesthetics attributed to the presence of forests. How much

would it cost to provide, by artificial systems, the ecological services provided by the forest? I am sure the sum of all these would bury the values I have previously held supreme.

I hear dire predictions from my consultant colleagues about how well the forest resources will sustain the values treasured by the public. Most concur that more than one third of the timber harvesting on properties in the southern-most counties of New Hampshire are terminal. Sprawl will take the place of forest to the extent that most of the towns in the area will be completely built out in 25 years, further, they will be completely “conserved out” in that time span, that is, all opportunities for conserving/preserving land will be foreclosed.

Considering the outlook by fellow forestry practitioners I am very thankful for the public lands in this community. There are six officially designated town forests under the stewardship of the Forestry Committee and the Conservation Commission has stewardship responsibility for two more officially designated town forests. All of these parcels have been designated as town forests by vote of town meeting in accordance with enabling legislation at the state level. Any change in the use of these parcels to other than natural resource related uses must be authorized by vote of town meeting.

All of the town forest parcels, plus numerous other town owned parcels acquired through non-payment of taxes, by gift, and by purchase under the state funded Land Conservation Investment Program, superseded by the Land Conservation and Heritage Investment Program, are open space anchors. Conservation easements on private lands and further town forest acquisitions can be planned to link the anchors into a chain forming greenbelts for the benefit of future generations. I believe that positive thinking and proactive efforts by citizens will make this happen during the window of opportunity rapidly closing under the increasing rate of development in town.

From my perspective societal trends, public attitudes, and economics all argue for more public lands and for more careful stewardship on the public lands we have. Members of the local natural resource planning groups share my sentiment and this reflects the sentiment of people from all over New England who responded to the public opinion polls previously mentioned. The Forestry Committee and the Conservation Commission, including its Open Space Sub-Committee, urge us to support three articles on the town warrant that are critical to their programs.

A yes vote on Article 8 will place the majority of the newly acquired Sherburne lot on the list of designated town forests. Passage of this article will validate the time, money, and effort previously invested by the members of the Forestry Committee in studying and securing this property. The committee believes that the Sherburne lot can be a valuable town forest because of the significant wetland habitat it contains and the potential it holds for future forest production. The role of this property as a link in the greenbelt chain is also significant. The property is adjacent to the Lydia Dodge lot, our town forest centerpiece, and on the north there are two large private forest parcels protected by conservation easements. As part of our town forest the Sherburne lot will form a continuous greenbelt chain about 2.5 miles in length, comprised of town forest lands and protected private lands, running from nearly the center of town southwesterly to the Mont Vernon town line.

A yes vote on Article 7 will enable the Forestry Committee to carry on stewardship activities on the existing town lands such as property boundary establishment and maintenance, improvement of forest access roads, and preparation of management plans. Further, the funds will enable the committee to engage in efforts to acquire additional town forest lands. The Forestry Committee activities can be self-supporting with income from periodic well-planned timber harvests.

Finally, the passage of Article 6 will help lift the town out of the cellar with respect to its ability to move ahead with open space acquisition. On the list of towns in this state that appropriate money for open space, New Boston ranks in the lowest 10 percent in terms of the amount appropriated. This does not bode well in 2003 *“In the Country”* by Robert Todd

light of the fact that this town has the third fastest growth rate in the state. We have a serious disconnect between public sentiment, the will of the people, and our ability to “toe the line” in the critical race against the agents of irreversible change to our community’s landscape.

Pa’tridge Memoir (4/2003)

That sunny, cold morning in late February Laura’s voice echoed through the rooms from the front hall to my desk, “Bob, come here and see the bird in the crab apple tree.” My associates had been briefed and were on their way to the field. Now I needed to concentrate on a report that should have been completed the day before. In her tone I detected more than the usual excitement she gets from her bird-feeding program in the back yard consisting of several feeders strategically located so that they are visible from the kitchen window, my office, and from her office. Often she calls me to help her identify a bird that has come to the feeders, usually I welcome the interruption, other times I am annoyed by the distraction from my work. My thoughts this time were, oh she probably has spotted the first robin, or maybe there is a hungry flock of cedar waxwings moving through. In the case of the latter, then I too should not miss the show.

I hurried to the front door where Laura was peering through the storm door, straining to make out the rather large form of a bird gorging itself on the persistent crabapples about 50 feet from the house, in the open far from any cover. At first glance I recognized the bird, and blurted out “Partridge, how do you figure that?” I questioned aloud because I knew the odds of seeing a Ruffed Grouse in my front yard was about equal to seeing the snow melt that day with the temperature at 2 degrees and the wind blowing. Another associate working in the office also came to look at the partridge and said he had heard Ben, another of my associates, speak about seeing partridge tracks under the barn, and of seeing the bird in the dense group of white spruce I had planted next to the barn thirty five years ago. “Well”, I said, “now it makes a little more sense, the bird could get grit for his crop from the gravel under the barn and the spruce trees provided cover for him to roost safely from owls, hawks, foxes, and coyotes”.

Laura, my staff, and I were privileged to see this welcome winter visitor several times during the next few days. Laura saw him, or her, trying to approach the bird feeder nearest the window in her office. This was an amazing show, blue jays feigned attack upon the partridge and he being shy and non-aggressive in nature, was soon intimidated and walked away without filling his crop with the high protein seeds that fell out of the hanging feeder. We have not seen the enigmatic creature since that period of time.

Since that rare encounter, I have recalled the many fascinating times partridges and I interacted in the forest, their usual habitat, during my lifetime. I also recalled several of the many riveting tales that I listened attentively to while in Dodge’s Store or in Kane’s Luncheonette. Other stories were etched in my head while I was in the presence of wildlife biologists during my early government employment as a forest and wildlife manager at Fort Devens. The first of these sources were legendary sportsman and the second were esteemed experts in the natural history of North America’s most favored game bird.

My early childhood interaction with grouse was with my father. In the fall I would ride with Dad in his old Ford truck delivering firewood to his customers. Dad always carried a single shot Stevens 16 gauge shot gun in the truck during these trips over country roads lined with stonewalls. He scanned these stonewalls as he drove, hoping to spot a hapless bird; seeing one he stopped the truck, stepped out on the road and shot the bird before it could take flight. This is how I learned that partridge was a most tasty dish. Grandma did the cooking, fricassee style, and we did the eating. I later learned that this hunting method was not good sportsmanship, but Dad was a practical minded man hunting more for the meat than for the sport.

Perhaps my most memorable encounter with old ruff was a day very similar to the weather here during mid-February, extremely cold and the ground covered with deep, fluffy snow. I was on snowshoes measuring
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along a timber cruise line through the forest of Fort Devens. Suddenly, right in front of my snowshoe, I noticed a dark spot just below the otherwise pure white surface. I stooped over and carefully extended my hand into the cottony snow. My fingers touched the object and sent a message back to my brain ... feathers! My first thought was that a bird had died during the last storm. Eager to see what kind of feathered creature this was, I extended my other hand into the snow, clutched the creature, and lifted it to eye level. I cannot explain the feeling that came over me at that moment, it is one that I will carry to the grave. I was looking into the dark brown eye of a live partridge! He did not struggle in my gentle grasp, we just looked into each other's soul for perhaps three or four minutes. Then I turned the bird this way and that to see if he was injured. No injuries being apparent, I opened my hands ... he stood for a few seconds on my palms, then like a bullet flew off into the pine forest.

With excitement, I relayed this story to a US Fish and Wildlife Biologist who provided technical assistance to my program. He quietly explained that the ruffed grouse is a survivor, the species dominated the forest in association with another native, the turkey, for millennia before the arrival of Europeans on this continent. The turkey was extirpated and the grouse flourished. Because the grouse does not migrate, it developed survival tactics to overcome the extreme winter weather. He added that the bird lowers its energy use about 30% by diving into soft snow and "roosting" for days in the warmer snow out of the wind. "Amazing" said I in exclamation, "but, would the bird get trapped if rain came and froze forming a thick crust on the surface?" He replied, "No, there is no record of grouse being trapped in this manner".

Countless times I have encountered my old friend ruff, while surveying along land lines running through hardwood sapling thickets and along the edge of old fields and orchards, some of the bird's favored habitat. Most of these occasions, ruff has delighted in scaring me witless by the sudden thunder of his take off from under my feet. Generally, these ground dwellers will freeze in place until approached within about 10 feet before exploding into flight.

Less frequently, I would encounter Mrs. Ruff while nesting. She incubates from 7-12 creamy to buff colored eggs in a nest on the ground. She is a giant when it comes to protecting her nest and brood. Although the mother will not leave her nest until closely approached, she effectively leads most predators away by hissing, clucking, and dragging a wing as if broken. This act lures predators well away from her eggs or young chicks, then she flies away to circle back to her nest. I have witnessed this exquisite behavior several times, an experience that has sealed in my mind a great adoration and respect for the species.

One story I find most amusing involves Homer Dodge, former proprietor of Dodges Store and a renowned sportsman. This was during the time that Homer had a well-stocked sporting goods section in the old store including sporting arms, ammunition, and hunting clothing. Homer was also one to poke a little fun at people. During those days New Boston was noted for its excellent grouse and woodcock cover, more so than today, and this attracted "elite sportsmen" from Massachusetts. Willy Nickerson, Homer's hunting buddy happened to be in the store the day this is said to have occurred. A station wagon with Massachusetts plates loaded down with caged hunting dogs and hunters decked out in the latest Pendleton hunting attire pulled up to the front steps of the store. The "flatlanders" sauntered into the store and walked up to Homer's sporting goods section. One of the men looked down his nose at Homer and said, "Do you stock shot for grouse?" Homer looked at Willy and they shared a glimmer of anticipation. Homer proudly replied, "No, but I have some damned good ca'tridges for pa'tridges."

I am looking forward to hearing that "put put ... put pur-r-r-r" sound made by the male partridge swiftly beating his wings to signal the beginning of the love season. Hopefully, the snow will have melted to uncover the drumming logs by the time old ruff is ready in mid-April.

Wisdom from Raindrops (5/2003)

Original title: A Water Cycle Story as Told by April Showers

Rain against the window behind my chair progressively draws my attention and I imagine hearing a story channeled to me through some unknown phenomenon. It was not the quieting, romanticized “pitter, patter” that I heard; it was “uh, ouch, ooow”, cries of agony resulting from the collision of raindrops falling at terminal velocity against the window glass.

The sounds of pain continued and I listened to an unfolding story of the everlasting cycle of the liquid from which all life emerged and now sustains all life on this earth. I was told by the raindrops that they do not always return to the earth in painful collisions and it is just the luck of the draw that determines their fate. Sometimes they get lucky and fall softly on the needles of a giant pine tree. Other returns are even more comfortable, such as when they come down as mist, or fog. All the raindrops told me their favorite way of traveling down from the clouds is in the form of uniquely beautiful snowflakes; very slowly to a fluffy cushion.

The story went on and I was amazed to hear the raindrops tell of the trillions upon trillions of trips they had made through the water cycle since the beginning of time. Several told me about the many very enjoyable times they had while passing through the earthbound portion of their timeless cycle. One particular raindrop, despite the pain he felt after hitting my window, smirked about the time he had been in the tub with Cleopatra. Another was proud that he had been with the dinosaurs, some extinct for a million years, and that he helped keep them healthy.

Then another told me that he really loves the trips he makes in the form of surface water. These trips are thrilling at times as gravity moves him down steep slopes causing rapids that thrust him up into white water columns as he rushes along to flatter lands where swamps and marshes slow him down again; it is here he enjoys a respite. The time he spends in swamps in communion with the many species of insects, fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds that depend on him for life support gives meaning to his existence. Often, along his way to the ocean, he spends time playing with children in the water of ponds and lakes. One happy raindrop said his favorite time is when he is mixed with scotch in someone’s cocktail.

Some raindrops were not pleased with many of their earthly experiences, particularly those involving epochs underground. They infiltrated the soil, replenished ground water, and spent thousands of years moving through the minuscule, completely dark spaces between soil particles before finally emerging in springs, or by being pumped forcefully to the surface by mechanical methods devised by man. Their time in pipes and tanks was even more unpleasant than moving through soil.

Many raindrops shouted to me that I should not do things that make their time on earth miserable. I asked, what they were referring to. One raindrop took the time to explain that all mankind are responsible for much guilt and depression raindrops feel while on earth. Raindrop went on to say that people forget that water is a universal solvent and when they put toxic chemicals in his presence he just puts it in the solution with him. Due to his affinity for such chemicals raindrop says he haplessly binds himself to the toxic chemicals and carries them along through the many organisms in the food chain, including humans, causing sickness and even death. He softly added that he was sorry about dissolving the vast quantities of road salt used this winter and that by carrying it in solution to the roadside vegetation he was particularly responsible for all those pine and hemlock trees now turning brown.

Raindrop told me of an unfortunate experience he had while flowing in sheets of water over lawns in a residential neighborhood directly adjacent to a small tributary to a town beach. He, and millions of his raindrop relatives, had inadvertently picked up along the way bacteria commonly found in animal feces, including dogs and cats. People using the beach came in contact with the bacteria in solution and became sick. Other raindrops

told similar stories of how man's activity has caused water to become polluted to the point where it is not "swimmable and drinkable" and they are tired of taking the rap.

I spoke to Raindrop in defense of the human race; we really do not intend to cause pollution, but most of us do not understand the consequences of our action. Raindrop's reply to me was, well why don't you start by telling people there are simple measures to prevent water pollution such as protecting wetlands from alteration and by maintaining natural forest buffer strips between areas of development and streams? I agreed with Raindrop that the logic behind his recommendation should be easy for all human beings to understand. The presence of vegetation and organic matter on the soil within buffer strips filters water flowing in sheets and traps suspended solids and even traps bacteria.

More raindrops fell on my window and I began to feel as uneasy as a little boy at a picnic being scolded by all the adults. I slouched down in my chair as paranoia crept over me. Still I heard one raindrop call to me. He was apologetic that raindrops have a paradoxical nature; on one hand, he said, we are necessary for all life, but on the other hand we can do a lot of damage to ecological systems by being the agent of erosion. He illustrated his point by saying that when he hits the ground at about 33 miles per hour his energy can dislodge soil and move it along in the direction of his flow, soon he enters rills and gullies gaining more velocity and picking up more soil and carrying it along to surface waters and wetlands, there depositing tons of sediment. Raindrop continued to scold, although erosion is a natural process, because of man's insensitivity in land use it is greatly accelerated.

Raindrop acknowledged that man must disturb vegetation and the topsoil in construction projects necessary to meet the demands of increasing population. But, he said man must protect his land from the power of us raindrops. He went on to advise that people learn about the several simple and effective measures that can be used on construction projects to hold the soil in place and allow him to flow over and around disturbed soil areas without doing so much damage. I could see that he was a wise raindrop and that following his advice would surely be less costly in the long run for developers and less harmful to the environment.

I wanted to change the mood of my discussion with the raindrops and interjected- all raindrops must surely be pleased when they leave the earthly phase of the water cycle and enter the vapor phase in the atmosphere. One raindrop replied that indeed this was a very peaceful part of his journey powered mostly by the sun that drives evaporation from surface water and transpiration from plant tissue. He breathlessly told me how great it is to feel ultimate freedom of movement in the atmosphere and to tumble aimlessly through the clouds. Alas, I then heard another raindrop complain about how derelict man can be in protecting his environment and that even in the atmosphere raindrops can be induced to do the work of the devil. Oh please tell me more, I deplored sarcastically.

Raindrop cautioned, it is more of a problem than even many well meaning human beings can remedy, but industries with stacks send emissions into the atmosphere that join with us to form carbonic acid, nitric acid, sulfuric acid and other compounds that degrade water quality. We then sorrowfully bring these with us to the earth. Acid Rain! I exclaimed. This can cause all sorts of ecological nightmares including diminished tree growth, diminished wetland habitat quality, even the accelerated destruction of buildings constructed of stone. We are only beginning to understand the affects of this form of pollution.

The rain stopped but my discussion with the raindrops lingered in my mind. I recalled the facts relating to the water cycle, first there will never be any more or less quantity of water in the cycle. Second, during each phase of the cycle, water is perilously exposed to conditions and circumstances that greatly affect its quality. I concluded that man must solve the problem of how to maintain high standards of water quality. Otherwise, the lack of potable water will surely retard the growth of civilization.

Gardening & Manure (6/2003)

On a recent sunny Saturday, one of few this spring, I had the joy of being with my oldest Grandson while doing some garden work. About nine o'clock in the morning my daughter Jackie brought Gregg here fully equipped with backpack containing water, extra clothes, and emergency rations. Gregg is an enthusiastic Boy Scout and in his endeavors never compromises the famous motto "Be Prepared". I could see that I had some great help that morning and was confident that the day's task would be completed.

We gathered up the tools, placed them in the pickup truck, and proceeded to the garden plot still drably decorated with the residue of the last crop, the black plastic mulch, and the wire cages containing the skeletons of tomato vines. The only green showing was witch grass, so prolific and sturdy that it has pierced the plastic and grown nearly 8 inches. I told Gregg that the objective was to remove the relics of last season's garden so that it can be prepared for a new planting about Memorial Day, a traditional planting time probably established by my Great Grandfather more than a hundred years ago.

The work of taking up the tomato plant cages and removing the plant skeletons went well. Then we took upon us the task of removing the black plastic mulch that covered nearly 2000 square feet of garden soil, eagerly awaiting exposure to the sun and its annual grooming by the rototiller. Gregg and I applied great gusto to the task, but soon realized that this would be much harder than expected. The witch grass had "spiked" the plastic to the soil and the above ground portion of the grass was secured to a woven network of stolons under the plastic. So, in effect we had to pull the mass of witch grass with the roots and stolons along with the plastic. We found that a garden rake worked most efficiently by rolling this mass into "logs" that we picked up and placed in the pickup body.

An hour passed and I was beginning to feel my shoulder and back muscles strain from raking up the heavy mat and I noticed too that Gregg's energy was faltering. He went to his pack, stuffed into it the sweatshirt he had removed, and devoured a high-energy bar while waving off the swarm of black flies around his head. The one item not included in his "Be Prepared" pack was insect repellent. Both of us bathed our exposed flesh from a bottle of "Skintastic" I kept in the cab of the pickup.

I realized that I needed to do something to keep Gregg's mind off the difficult task we faced and chose to tell a story of how gardening was done on this farm by his ancestors. I started out by explaining that all plant residue was removed in the fall and the garden plot was harrowed to accept a cover crop of winter rye that sprouted and grew up to a height of about 8 to 12 inches before the fall frost. In the spring the rye started growing early and was usually lush by the second week in May. Gregg's waning interest seemed unaffected so far.

I went on about the next traditional task on this family garden. His interest was regained somewhat when I told him that this was the usual time when the barn manure, a mixture of cow and horse manure, that had been accumulating in the barn cellar all winter was loaded by hand into the old horse drawn spreader. I told him that my Dad allowed me to drive Dick and Jerry; the trusty old work horses that Dad kept until their retirement about 1950. About four spreader loads were spread thickly on the garden right over the winter rye. Dad then used the team to plow the garden, usually immediately after spreading the manure. He guided the horses to turn over the soil leaving neat furrows straight as an arrow, I usually trailed along behind to pick up earthworms turned up on the top of the furrows. I easily filled a coffee can with the wiggly creatures and later used them to bait small brook trout in the Middle Branch of the Piscataquog River that runs close by. My youthful mind was not aware of the great service the earthworms provided to the garden.

As we paused momentarily, I reminisced about the smell of the newly plowed earth and the joy of planting the small seeds under the guidance of my patient Grandfather. This was a heartening experience in my 2003 *"In the Country"* by Robert Todd

life, more so than the task of hand weeding the long rows of beets and carrots that soon followed planting. It seemed like those rows were a mile long, though they were only about 50 feet in length.

The story made the task less daunting and soon Gregg and I had filled the pick up body with all the plastic and the considerable weight of witch grass attached to it. Gregg quickly jumped into the truck with me and we left the black flies behind as we headed for the dump, oops, I mean the transfer station where we threw all the waste into the “hopper”. Having to dispose of all this heavy waste was repulsive to me.

Since I needed to fertilize the asparagus bed this spring, we proceeded directly to New Boston Hardware to obtain two bags of 10-10-10 fertilizer. I pointed out to my Grandson how convenient it is to use commercial fertilizer compared with the labor of using barnyard manure. I also explained to him that the numbers represented the fertilizer analysis in percent by weight of Nitrogen, Phosphorous, and Potash (N-P-K) in that order.

I brought Gregg home right after lunch, but the thoughts about the way gardens and fields were fertilized in the past lingered in my consciousness. All that I had learned from Dad and Grandfather about the benefits of fertilizer replayed in my head and I wondered if the soil in our gardens is as healthy as it was when fertilized with cow manure. I was convinced that it is not.

Later I reviewed an old map prepared by the State Department of Agriculture in 1938 that shows the location, owners’ name, and the number of livestock kept on each of the fifty farms randomly scattered over the town. A quick addition showed that there were at least 350 head of cattle in New Boston (I did not bother to total the hens, hogs, horses, and sheep that were also inventoried). How much manure would these farms have produced I wondered?

In research of an old college textbook of mine titled “Soils and Soil Management” I found that on average one dairy animal will produce nine tons of manure, including the bedding, in seven months that it is fed in the barn. Multiplying 9 tons by 350 cows, I calculate that 3,150 tons of cow manure was produced in this town at that time. Assuming this manure was placed on the fields and gardens at the average rate of 4 tons per acre (a figure also provided in the text) I went on to calculate that about 787 acres of cropland (gardens and fields) were improved annually by the application of cow manure alone. This may not sound like much, but at the time I am sure it contributed greatly to the economic welfare of the farm families living on the land.

I believe it is worth mentioning the benefits of applying manure to garden and field crops; most gardeners of the present may never have used natural farm manure. The principle benefits of manure accrue from the organic matter (OM) that it adds to the topsoil. OM improves the soil structure by sticking the grains of mineral soil together to form aggregates (crumbs) thereby reducing soil loss through wind and water erosion. A crumb structure improves drainage, aeration, and plant root development. Also, OM greatly improves the water holding capacity of topsoil; particularly in sandy soils such as we have at Todd’s Corner.

Further, OM makes soil darker and this allows it to absorb solar energy thereby raising the soil temperature that in turn promotes seed germination and biological activity in the soil. OM is the energy source for all soil microorganisms that increase numerically in direct proportion to the OM content of the topsoil. The life functions of these minute plant and animal organisms cause the release of nutrients that are taken up by garden plants.

Telling this story of my thoughts about farm manure has given me incentive to use more compost in my garden. This is a good substitute for manure, but requires application of commercial fertilizer to obtain the same results. I hope that, in this article, I have not projected an image of being a man “full of his subject”. Happy gardening!

A Ride on the Davis Scenic Drive (7/2003)

Recently Nonah Poole was showing me some of the documents that she and others are sorting and indexing at the Historical Society building. Out of a pile of previously overlooked papers, Nonah recovered notes that had been penned by the late Rena Davis along with some rubbings Rena had made of plaque inscriptions. The notes hinted of a ceremony sponsored by the Historical Society in 1980 to rededicate the River Road Groves. The documents were not surprising to me; but Nonah's state of being unaware of the significance of what she found caused my amazement.

For several days I brought into casual discussions with local people questions about their awareness of the River Road "greenway". One young man that was raised in town had no knowledge of why the road meanders through several miles of forest. He said, "I just thought the developers had not yet got to it". Yesterday I was on the road and stopped to talk with a fisherman from Manchester. I asked why he comes here, "It is easy to get to and the fishing is usually good". I asked, "Do you know the land along the road has been preserved from development?" He answered, "No".

Obviously, the Davis Scenic Drive story needs to be told again and I wish I knew the whole story. Gleaning deeds, reading plaque inscriptions, and probing my memory have provided some understanding I can share. It appears that Chris Coleman, a resident of the village in the 1930's, initiated a project of preserving "groves" along the River Road. At his side in this effort was at least one other person, not unexpectedly, being Louis Swanson. Reverend Swanson's name is connected with so many other great events and community affairs.

The Coleman/Swanson committee must have called upon a higher power to convince the Langdell Lumber Company to give 25 acres of forestland to the town as the first forest preserve. Following the description in the town's deed, dated July 23, 1928, appears this paragraph, "*This conveyance is made for the purpose of providing for the preservation and maintaining of shade trees in and along the highways in said town of New Boston and is made subject to the following trusts and conditions: ...shall hold, use and manage the said premises for the public use and benefit as a public forest reserve forever...no cutting of trees thereon except such as may be necessary permanently to preserve the forest growth thereon in the most healthy condition possible.*"

The Langdell Grove runs from the residential lots near the entrance to the 4H Fairgrounds easterly along both sides of the road for one half mile to the next group of houses. The River Road Spring flows from the preservation and an old picnic area hides behind an overgrowing curtain of green. Many stately White Pine trees mixed in with large Hemlock spires close the overhead view to the sky to form a faux ceiling, as of a large room. The forest floor is so dark and acid that few plants grow there. On the north side of the road the preserve cradles oxbow channels that hold still water reflecting thin rays of sunlight passing through the evergreen skirts above. The juxtaposition of these channels creates a maze to challenge anyone walking from the road to the river. Occupants of speeding vehicles on the road through the preserve seem insensible to the natural beauty through which they pass.

Just beyond the Langdell Grove traveling toward Goffstown one passes by the Coleman Grove. There stands a bronze plaque securely attached to a boulder that credits Coleman with the idea of preserving the natural beauty of the highway. This is a thin forest buffer between the road and the river running for a distance of four tenths of a mile. The major cultural feature in the grove is a ramp of earth running toward the river from the road, directly across from a beautiful stone abutment on the opposite side of the Piscataquog River. I speculate that this was the site of a bridge used by the J. R. Whipple Farm operation for access to the vast pastures on the valley side slopes and constructed when Mr. Whipple brought the railroad along the northerly side of the river to New Boston village.

Just beyond its intersection with Gregg Mill Road the River Road spirals along as a “greenway” for six tenths of a mile to just east of Wilson Hill Road. On a narrow strip, from road to river, stands a pointed boulder with attached plaque attesting that as of 1932 the land is dedicated to Louis Swanson and is known as the Swanson Grove. On the right is a forest preserve about 125 feet wide parallel with the road known as the Fellows Grove granted to the town in 1931.

For the next two tenths of a mile and adjoining the Swanson/Fellows Groves the Greer Grove buffers River Road on both sides. A stout boulder just eight feet from the southerly side of the pavement holds the Greer commemorative dated 1932 and stands as a bulwark against encroachment by the path of civilization against the natural beauty behind it.

As if inspired and guided by the efforts of Coleman and Swanson, others have been responsible for adding much more land to the River Road/Davis Scenic Drive during the last 75 years to the extent that the greenway is complete along the road for 2.2 miles. Considering that it is difficult to convince people to give away their road frontage presently, I think it is even more remarkable that this project began in 1928! For all that has been done I am personally thankful and I hope my readers will “see and feel” this great amenity while driving River Road.

Old Homesteads: Linking Past With Present (9/2003)

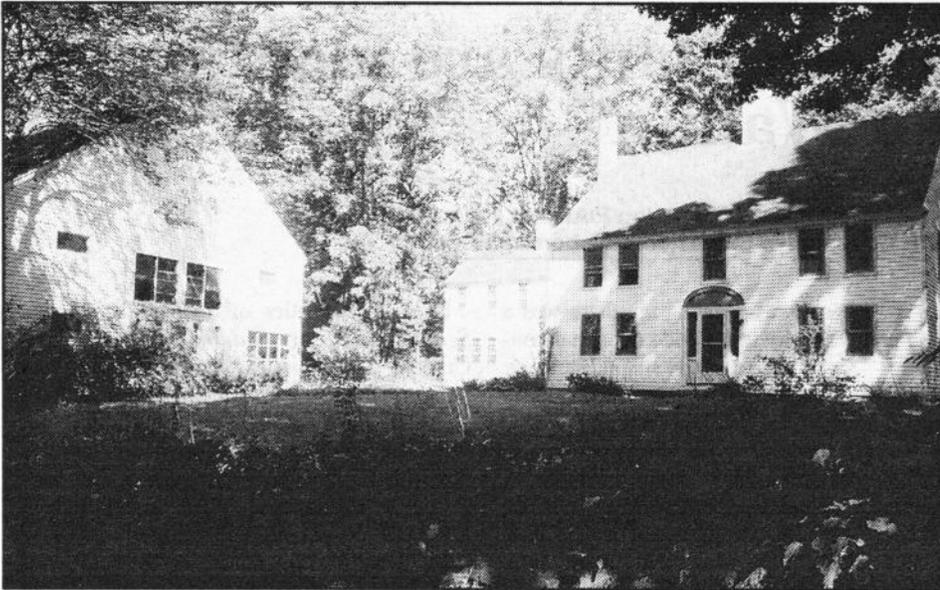
As a youth I pedaled my bicycle many times by a house on the old gravel road leading from Route 136 to Scoby Pond, my favorite swimming place. I remember the cool ride offered by the overarching oak trees and the company offered by the brook crossing twice under the road, one on each side of the old house. At the first crossing I always admired the brook as it tumbled loudly over a weir in stonewalls at an old mill site. The house between the brook crossings was always quiet, neat and welcoming. That was about fifty years ago.

During my lifetime I have known the folks that lived there, none have changed the outward appearance of the house much and all the while it matched the picture I held in my mind since youth; still quieting and welcoming. One of the previous owners hired me to assist them with supervising a timber harvest on the property-it was then that I was exposed to the beauty of the land away from the road. A second mill site and a hand-excavated canal were revealed while I reconnoitered the forest, in this I could see evidence of early industry. In old fields surrounded by massive stonewalls and linked by old cart trails, I read a history of intensive land use during the agricultural era of settlement on the land. All the physical features together told me that the property was very important to the lives of perhaps several generations of families that lived in the old house.

A third time, just a few years ago, I was engaged by the current owners to provide a survey of the property on which the old house stood. I cherished this project because it provided an opportunity to learn more about this land that I had loved for so long. The enjoyment felt from researching the deeds in the chain of title was like the feeling of being with an old friend. The records show that William Langdell and his son, Livermore, moved to the property in 1771. Livermore established the first sawmill and gristmill in this part of New Boston and he apparently prospered while raising twelve children. He sold the property to Zachariah Morgan of Ipswich, Massachusetts just before 1800. I learned from the records that the Morgan family flourished with industry and agricultural endeavors on the property until 1898, about one hundred years!

The survey was completed for the old Morgan Farm and I proudly drafted the location of the old mill sites, one being the former sawmill and the other a former bedstead factory. Linking the past with the present and passing it on to future landowners is the part of my work I really enjoy the most.

Recently, the hand of another person has more tightly stitched my attachment to the old Morgan Farm property, now commonly known as the “Hundred Acres Monastery”. I do not know this person to be a man or a woman and I do not even know the person’s name. However, the person prepared an impressive and beautiful, but unsigned, photographic journal, now in the possession of the New Boston Historical Society. Several weeks ago the journal was shown to me and I was immediately enchanted by it. Today, I spent several hours absorbing the story line the author was trying to tell in the journal. The book is a loving work of art bound in leather with fragile black construction paper pages. Particularly grabbing are the numerous old pictures of the Morgan Farm, mills, and of the Morgan family members pasted to the pages and captioned in calligraphy with white ink. The captions are often humorously worded and so personal that the reader is presumed to be acquainted with the subjects. The hands that wrote those words also reached up and touched my heart even though the person has probably been gone for many years.



With the pictures of the old Morgan Farm freshly scanned to my brain, I hurried from the Historical Society building to Scoby Road. The first half-mile is paved and passes through a residential area, not the image I remembered as a youngster. Suddenly, the pavement ended and I continued slowly on a gravel road down a hill under overarching tree crowns, cool, quiet, just as I recalled from my youthful experiences. At the first brook crossing I parked and stepped out of my truck to be greeted by the white curtain of

water falling from the weir and the peaceful sound of the brook ... nothing changed here. But, I projected the picture of the old Morgan Mill in the journal to the landscape in my field of vision ... no mill building present; it had been destroyed by fire in 1883. In its place physical features on the land suddenly meant more to me. I walked to the base of the dam structure and observed the stone foundation of the old mill right where the picture showed it to be. Behind the foundation I could visualize a cart path and mill yard ... the signs are still there under trees now nearly two feet in diameter.

I continued my drive to the old house. It is kept well maintained and the grounds are manicured ... not as a farm would look. However, I could visualize the old barn from the pictures in the journal and the lines of the barn in front of me are the same. The same is true of the lines of the house. A large sugar maple shades most of the lawn ... it was a small tree in the pictures ... the location of the old carriage way to the front door can be imagined. The only changes are an ell addition, the conversion of a carriage house to a screen house, and possibly the relocation of another building. All the old stonewalls are still intact. A picture today would compare closely with the journal pictures taken over 100 years ago. A strange feeling came over me while I stood in front of the homestead, it was like a personal reminiscence with the spirit of the person that authored the journal.

In the journal I noted connections between the Morgan family and other families I have come to know through researching land records on properties I have surveyed in town and in Frankestown. First, a connection by marriage exists between one Morgan son and one of Levi Hooper’s daughters. Levi Hooper inherited a farm from his father Jacob, one of the first settlers on Hooper Hill in New Boston. This strikingly beautiful historic

farm, now owned by Mark and Rhonda Luedke, is another fine example of the delightful architecture typical of early New Boston homesteads.

A second curious connection is between the “Kingsbury” homestead and the Morgan home. The Kingsbury family owned the unusual old brick farmhouse, the first on the right beyond the Francestown line heading west on Route 136. This home is most recently owned and, for three generations, has been owned by the Pettee family. This homestead has been beautifully maintained and sustains its heritage with glory.

The journal coincidentally provided me with information about my own roots that I had not previously known. For this I thank that loving unknown author. It told me that Livermore Langdell’s daughter, Abigail, married my 3rd great-grandfather, David Starrett. The first settler at the old home and the builder of the old stone dam I have so long adored is one of my ancestors!

In closing I will add a reminder that members of the New Boston Historical Society are preparing for publication a pictorial history of old homesteads in town. It may not be as spiritual or personal as the old Morgan journal, but will certainly help link the past with the present and contribute to the character of many old homesteads in town. Time and history, land and community are all intertwined; a basic principle, I believe, that should guide the Historical Society in this project.

THE DEMONS AMONG MY FOREST FRIENDS (10/2003)

My time in the forest is mostly vocational and I am blessed with very pleasant feelings while also earning a living. Other times I go to the forest for therapy, for it is there that I experience beauty, peace, and spiritual awareness. These are emotions that I share with many of my colleagues and with friends and neighbors. It is the plants and animals that graciously share their environment with me who are my partners in the workday and my benefactors in recreation and life.

As benefactors, my forest friends fill my breath with clean, aromatic air during my work and play times. Caught in sudden showers, a hemlock thicket will often keep me dry. In the winter these same hemlock thickets protect me from the discomforts of the “Montreal Express”. Tall timber always cools me and protects my skin from the blistering rays of the sun; protection most needed against the high angled rays during July. My observations of form, color, texture, and composition reflected in trees, shrubs, vines, and herbs of the forest and forest edge during my workday and recreational hours satisfy my visual senses. I never get bored with the visual quality of the forest environment because it is always changing; seasonally and diurnally. The excitement of chance encounters with animals in their habitat, whether chickadee or bear, make me feel more alive through constant renewal of my emotions.

Beyond personal satisfaction, the forest community benefits my community! So many aspects of my well being, and my friends and neighbors well being, that are attributable to the forest, are often taken without thought and respect for the source. Most notably are the commodity values, too numerous to list here, that include the obvious: lumber, paper, fuel, and recreational use. Less obvious benefits amassed are the environmental functions provided by the forest community. Trees moderate the ever-increasing noise from highways. Trees provide visual screening of unsightly land uses on the one hand, and framing of vistas on the other, to determine the aesthetic quality of our community. Soil building and the holding of soil in its place, maintenance of water quality, and regulating storm-water runoff are some of the long-range benefits of our community forest. Perhaps the least understood benefit accruing from the forested landscape, globally as well as on the community level, is the role it plays in the cycling of nutrients such as carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorous.

My enthusiasm for writing about the forest contrasts with the counterpoint in the theme of my essay. Are there demons in the forest? As one that has a career spanning more than forty years in the forest, I can say that I have sworn at and suffered from my relationship with some plants that I consider agents of the devil. Some plants greatly annoy me because they hinder my work and the work of my associates; other plants threaten my well being by tearing my flesh and poisoning my skin. These are plants that can be avoided by those who recreate in the forest. My vocational endeavors, unfortunately lead me into close contact with the demons.

I still fail to understand why the physical evidence of property lines such as drill holes in stonewalls, old iron pipes, and granite bounds, the location of which must all be surveyed, are always guarded by thick vines of the poison ivy plant. Perhaps this is the plant world's objection to man's attempt to impose his lines upon the earth, to possess and subdue the natural world. If this is the case, fine ... but why must the surveyor be the one to suffer, he is only an agent of the invading force. Several times a year, regardless of the season, I come in contact with the stems or leaves of this plant. Taking a hot soapy shower and changing clothes as soon after exposure as possible minimizes my reaction to the plant oil. However, there always seems to be some oil that penetrates the skin between my fingers. My associates also share my discomfort due to the necessity of their task of having to find and contact the property markers. They practice, to the extent possible, the adage, "when leaves are three, leave them be".

Another less encountered poisonous plant is poison sumac. The oil from the leaves and stems of this shrub cause huge blisters on my skin, which soon erupt to leave open sores. This species must be nature's guardian of swamps and bogs because it is usually stationed there en masse to encounter anybody that may attempt to cross its line of defense. We avoid this one whenever possible, but our work with wetland mapping often pits us against its fortification. My associates have easily learned how to identify this shrub with its growth form so similar to the non-poisonous smooth sumac prevalent in old fields. The distinguishing feature of the poisonous plant is the drooping bunch of white berries that persist into winter: "if berries are white, keep them out of your sight".

Several other plants tear my clothes and my flesh when I attempt to do my work in their midst. In resistance to man's invasion, greenbrier, also known as catbrier, usually surrounds the location where property markers are to be found. Catbrier is appropriately named because of the dense thorns that armor the vines of this plant. The thorns are shaped like cat claws and are equally sharp and tough. Blood usually flows from my body after challenging a tangled net of catbrier vine.

Black locust is a tree that grows in the vicinity of old homesteads where the first settlers planted the species for use as fence posts and rails. The wood of this tree is naturally decay resistant and posts have been known to last over 100 years in the ground. Infrequently, I encounter root sucker saplings of this species that have limbs with woody thorns nearly an inch long. This is warning enough for me and I give this species wide berth.

Hawthorn shrubs are common in old pastures and forest edges. Spikes well over an inch long protrude from the stems in close spacing. I often find small mammals impaled on the spikes, presumably being stored there by birds of prey for later consumption. I don't mess with these demons; being impaled with a hawthorn spike could require an emergency room visit.

Common buckthorn is prevalent along the edge of fields strategically guarding stonewalls and fences in the vicinity of property markers. These shrubs have fiendish woody thorns that fend off surveyors that are compelled to measure the location of such objects.

The three woody shrubs mentioned above are not nearly as effective in their role in defeating man's invasion of the environment, as are multiflora rose and barberry. I think the devil convinced the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resource Conservation Service, to encourage farmers to plant multiflora

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rose and barberry as natural fences and conservation plants. Nature gratefully adopted multiflora rose as a first line of defense against anyone entering the land upon which it has become established. This plant grows invasively in dense thickets of flexible thorn covered stems that criss-cross one another to weave an impenetrable barrier. Barberry is similar in growth habit, possibly a little more dense, and has barbs so sharp that one cannot, without gloves, be spared pain in grasping a stem.

It is convincing to me, in the case of the wide spread agricultural use of barberry and multiflora rose, that demonic spirits have, in the past, influenced our most revered national agency. But, the spirits continue to influence individual home- owners in the management of plants in their immediate environment. I have personally been involved in forensic work related to hazard trees. In one case a town agency had placed fill around a maple tree on a public beach causing the roots to slowly die from suffocation and the crown to diminish. In spite of an inspection of the beach for unsafe conditions by a town official, the tree was toppled by the wind and fell on a young mother. She died while her two children looked on in horror. Surely the devil was at work to induce intelligent people to place 2 feet of fill over the root system of the maple tree and then to make the town inspector blind to the existence of the hazard tree.

I admit to satirical story telling here, but I hope to point out that some plants are dangerous and anyone going into the forest should learn to identify those species. More importantly, I hope to instill within the minds of readers a better understanding that trees can become deadly when subjected to poor land management practices.

Traditional Neighborliness: A House Raising (11/2003)

It was a pleasant September day that I drove the long circuitous driveway to Jon and Heather Strong's home. The invitation that I received a few days before from my niece, Heather, had stirred my curiosity and I was eager to attend their house-raising. The drive through the uninterrupted forest cleared my mind of the world I live in and my thoughts traveled in time to the settlement period of New Boston ... a time when it was necessary for neighbors to join together for their common good, even survival.

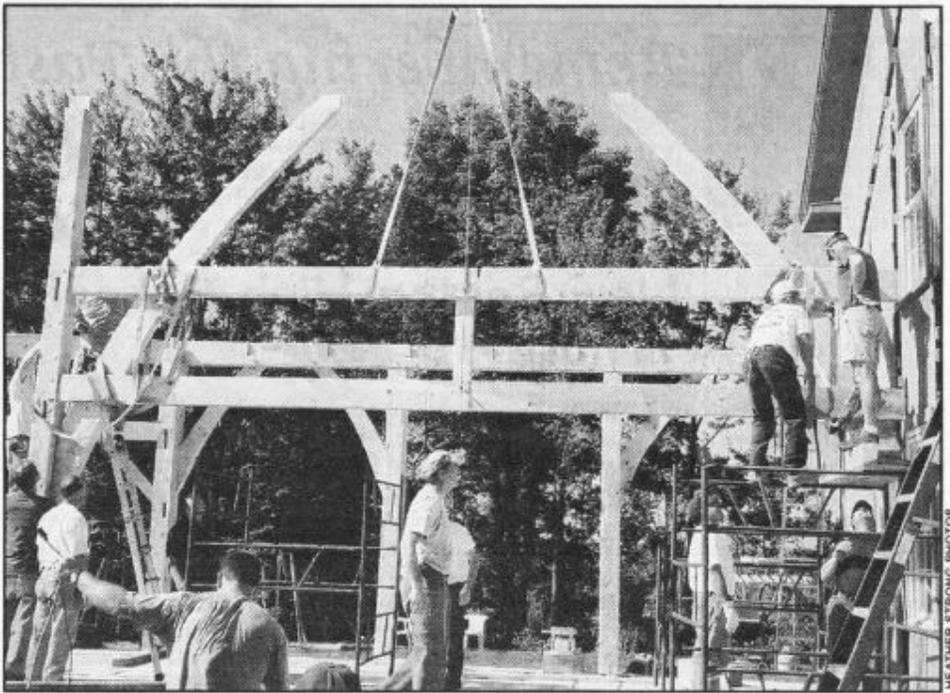
Neighborly assistance given to new settlers in town began with clearing the forest for home sites and fields. A chopping bee was the most common method of clearing. Then, stone-hauling bees were held and neighbors for miles around would bring their oxen and stone boats to extract the many stones from fields intended for crops and hay. The men encouraged and inspired one another to do in a day what would take a lone settler many seasons to accomplish. Settlers had to work together to satisfy the conditions of their land grants; they had three years to clear six acres of land and seed it to hay and to build a house at least eighteen feet square, or face forfeiture of their land grant.

In my consciousness I was still in the eighteenth century when I arrived at the clearing in the forest. I perceived what I expected; a small house newly constructed, a garden with colorful pumpkins and flowers, plus other vegetables not yet harvested. Near the existing house many people, probably 20 to 30, were attentively engaged in many activities - so attentive were they that even people I knew did not acknowledge my arrival. Instead of vehicles, I saw in my mind tethered teams and wagons; instead of some power tools and a truck-mounted crane, I imagined images of tripods and pulley blocks. It could have been a September day in 1760 ... the resolve of the assembly was the same as it would have been then - to erect a post and beam frame in the shortest time possible.

I just stood for a few moments, fascinated by the orderly movement of men, women, and children, and the forces they applied to materials being set in place. On my left a young woman was seated on a shaving horse expertly handling a drawshave to form treenails, sometimes called trunnels, from white oak stakes split and cut to 18-inch lengths. She worked steadily to keep a supply of these "pegs" for workmen to drive with

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mallets into holes drilled through the joints in the frame – no metal spikes would be used. Bo Strong was resting in a chair nearby and he told me that Glen Dodge, the commander of the whole operation had made the shaving horse by hand. In jest he said, “Glen had to make this tool because he could not find one at Home Depot.”



Close by I saw a table spread with abundant dishes of casseroles, salads, and assorted deserts, in addition to a choice of beverages. I thought to myself, this is just as it would have been long ago, except for the choice of beverage. There was no rum in sight! In 1760 there would have been a keg of rum on hand. Today, it was not liquor that plied these folks to such a high level of accomplishment. Instead, could it have been an instinctive desire to be neighborly, programmed into human behavior when ancient man needed his neighbors to survive?

Near the structure were stacks of braces, long beams, corner posts, and trusses. One or

more enthusiastic volunteers moved these pieces to the place where they would eternally stand to do their part in holding up the massive frame. I saw as many as 18 volunteers work in unison to move one of the long beams. Some of the workers I knew to be friends, neighbors, and relatives of Jon and Heather, others I was told were colleagues from work. I was amazed that this force of energy was so well directed and inspired by the man in charge, Glen Dodge. I conjured up many questions that I wanted Glen to answer that day, but there was no way that I could capture a moment with him.

Two weeks later, with my mind in the present, I interviewed Glen Dodge by telephone and he freely offered eloquent answers to queries I posed. His enthusiasm for his craft of post and beam construction methods was obvious to me during the conversation. Proudly, he stated, “I have learned the craft of timber joinery by self-study, primarily by observing how old buildings have been put together.” He remarked, “Over the past 16 years I have learned much by attending seminars sponsored by the Timber Framers Guild of North America.” I was surprised to hear him say that “some of the timber scribing techniques used in post and beam construction can be traced back 500 years to their origin in France.”

Glen said, “I enjoy the traditional methods of post and beam building and I avoid using steel plates for support in framing and also stay away from producing standardized frame pieces that can be used interchangeably from one frame to another and even from other locations in the same frame.” The pieces that Glen designs have only one “address” in the frame and cannot be interchanged. Further, he favors using long timbers as plates and sills to reduce the number of joints in the frame.

When I asked what he meant by “address”, he explained that each frame is scribed and cut at his shop and there has to be a system to identify the location that each unique timber will occupy in the structure. One of the corner posts is usually chosen as the point of beginning and all other pieces are given an “address” relative to that point of beginning. According to Glen, the addressing system he uses was commonly used until about 2003 *“In the Country”* by Robert Todd

1810 and has been brought back into the practice of craftsmen using traditional post and beam construction methods today. I asked if the marks I observed on some of the beams at Jon and Heather's home were the address symbols he is talking about. He replied, "Yes ... each of the 175 pieces in the frame I made has a symbol cut into the wood with a chisel."

During my questioning I realized that there was a lot more effort put into the frame for the Strong's house than I thought, and I admitted this to Glen. "Oh yes," was his exclamation. He elaborated, "Months before the 'raising' I design the structure using my computer assisted design program. This gives me a list of pieces and shows all the angles that must be cut to form the joints ... I can even assemble the frame on my computer screen and view it from any perspective in three dimensions." "What next", I prompted. "I go into the forest and find the trees that will yield each timber. I even find trees with 'sweep' from which to cut my curved braces", he stated.

Without my prompting he described additional preparations he makes before arriving at the building site the day of the house-raising. "I lay out each 'bent' in the frame on the floor of my shop and scribe the pieces to fit together ... all the mortise and tenon joints are cut in addition to the other interlocking joints I intend to use". "What is a 'bent'", I asked. "That is a section of a wall in the frame - could be a gable end, or a 'broadside'," he answered. I inquired further, "Do you put the bents together to make sure they are going to fit as planned." Quickly, he answered, "Twice, once at my shop and again at the building site where we actually put the bents together and then erect them after assembly. Sometimes, at the building site, the joints have to be 'skived' out some with a chisel because the timbers have shrunk, or twisted slightly."

I could see this discussion was getting too technical for me to comprehend, so I changed my line of questioning to a more general focus, "Glen, how important is the traditional post and beam craft?" He replied, "There are 2000 to 3000 such frames erected nationally each year and I have erected over 25 in my career, most being in house-raising scenarios. My biggest project was at Camp Carpenter in Manchester where I 'raised' a two and one half story post and beam frame named 'Fort Friendship and Chapel'." He went on to say, "This project was memorable because the Boy Scout troops in the Council actually participated in erecting the frame and timbers are labeled with the identity of the troop responsible for putting them up."

I have observed the tradition of builders attaching a pine seedling to the ridgepole; I asked what that symbolized. He offered, "That is an age-old tradition to pay tribute to the forest from which the timbers have come ... I practice this tradition myself."

My final question to Glen was, "What are the advantages and disadvantages of post and beam construction?" Rapidly, he listed them: "One of the advantages is the aesthetic appeal of the timbers, and trusses, especially if these are curved. Secondly, there is the ease in which the 'stress skin panels' can be placed on the frame to provide a very high 'R' value for insulation. Then, there is the fire safety associated with the large timbers that do not burn rapidly like small dimension timbers in conventional homes, nor do they collapse like steel beams that lose their strength when heated. Wooden timbers hold their strength much longer in a fire. The last advantage I can think of is that the entire frame tends to hold together better under stress, especially wind stress, because it has less joints ... it is more of a 'unit' than conventional construction."

"Okay, what are the disadvantages", I asked. In a quieter voice, he answered, "Well, the frame is probably more expensive than conventional construction because of the intensive labor required to scribe and cut all the joints. Also, there may be more labor necessary to wire and plumb the structure because there are no hollow walls to hide this infrastructure." I ended the interview at the end of fifteen-minutes, as promised, because he was ready to leave for a weekend trip.

As I hung up the phone, a pleasant thought came to mind; my niece and her family will enjoy a beautiful, safe, and enduring home; and Glen Dodge is a great person to carry on the craft of traditional post and beam construction and house-raising.

HAND IN LAND: Connecting Students, Nature, and Design (12/2003)

I have come to see the New Boston Central School in a different light during the past three months. When the Fourth Graders designs are carried out, everyone will see the school as more than a brick and concrete edifice. This column addresses the integrated process that Fourth Graders have used to make models of their creative visions and preferences for learning and play areas on the entire school property.

My enlightenment began when Pat Jennings asked me to be on a committee of volunteers at the school. She gave me a Hand in Land program brochure that quickly sparked my interest, and then she explained, in her usual boundless exuberance, the merits of the program. I understood that the committee would be responsible for assisting the teachers, particularly Judy Keefe, with an Artist in Residence program during the school year that would focus on learning about the natural places surrounding the school buildings. My response to Pat was a spontaneous-yes! I must admit that my answer was partly in anticipation of being infected with excitement from the lady “with the bunny inside” and partly from my own interest in seeing our NBCS promote connections between children and nature.

Time went by, but I was not invited to meetings as is typical of committee work and I became uneasy about fulfilling my expectations. Randy Parker, also a committee member, soon contacted me and asked for my help in assembling maps of the school grounds. He explained how he would use the maps in compiling an overall topographic and boundary plan of the school properties. He went on to say that he would then use the plan to design and establish a grid network of 100-foot squares over the school property.

As he explained how he and the other volunteers would help the students stake the grid corner points on the ground, I began to comprehend the scope of the program. I learned that the plan was to have about three students and an adult volunteer inventory the natural features within their assigned grid and to measure the location of these features relative to the grid lines. Other student-adult teams would do the same on all the other grids. This is a process to which I personally relate and I became more enthralled with the project.

The next level in my involvement took place at the library one morning before it opened for public use. Pat Jennings led the discussion, for my benefit mostly because I suggested that the program would be the subject for my column-or maybe somebody suggested to me that it should be my subject. Judy Keefe, NBCS art teacher, provided me with the background of Hand in Land. She modestly stated that it came as a result of a grant request she wrote to the N.H. Council on The Arts. This grant funded the artist in residence, Ron King, a landscape architect specializing in natural playgrounds and a skilled teacher and author. She also emphasized the support given to the program by the Board of Selectmen, Recreation Department, PTA, and the School Board. The group speculated about how the result of the student’s work could, in the future, be expanded to a village wide study that would be used to design a walkable downtown, a vision that Pat and others hold dearly. I was eager to learn more and Judy agreed to set up a meeting with Ron King and me to view the project on the ground. Randy agreed to come along to provide more insight to my perspective.

Well, the meeting with Ron King turned out to be a telephone conference and I listened intently to his explanation of the project. His philosophy about providing the natural play opportunities preferred by children over manufactured playground environments, impressed me deeply. After Ron’s call, I reflected on my own childhood playtime. Perhaps the most vivid memories from my youth are the natural places that I imagined being forts and other centers of my play world. The boulder in the pasture in back of the barn was my “cover” in defending a wagon train against attack. I hunted “big game” along the edge of the hayfield and sailed the
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“ocean” in the small brook that runs through the field in front of the house. Although these natural places surrounding the old farm are small in my eyes today, they were vast wilderness areas in my boyhood eyes. Now, I fully grasped the importance of Hand in Land.

Randy and I met at the school one morning last week and I was eager to put myself in touch with the students’ project. Randy took the lead and we went up to the second floor of the school building to see the numerous models of natural play areas that the fourth graders had assembled from natural materials. I was astounded by the thought and energy represented in planning, designing, and building these models. They communicated the kind of play areas students wanted to build on the school property. I saw-boulder jumps, log forts, stick lean-tos, boardwalks among the trees, board ramps over boulders and logs, circles of stones, log climbing walls, and rope courses rigged between trees. I thought, wow, these are all the same kind of “places” that I loved as a boy.

Randy and I left the brick and concrete structure we all recognize as the NBCS and walked into another world that has now also become part of the school. This world consists of landforms, grass, trees, shrubs, vines, soil, and rocks. We saw these natural features as grist for a child’s imagination, just as Ron King said it would be.

Randy and I talked about his work in laying out the grid with the students and I could tell that he enjoyed that very much. As we walked over the grided landscape we dialogued about how the students noted their observations in journals and made measurements to locate the features they observed by pacing from the reference points. We concurred that they learned new math skills in the task of measuring and mapping the location of natural features. Their English was put to a practical test in noting observations, writing reports, and in giving oral reports. Their knowledge of science was enhanced by practice in plant identification and in understanding plant community relationships (ecology), in addition to availing themselves of the basics of geology and natural history.

Some word in our dialogue, or some thought, reminded me of Henry David Thoreau’s Walden. I think it was the similarity between what the students are doing in the natural “classroom” at NBCS and what Thoreau did at Walden Pond. I see Walden as an antidote to the idea that education is a passive, indoor activity. Thoreau’s book contrasts with today’s tendencies in society to segregate disciplines and to segregate man from his surroundings. Walden is a model of the unity between person, teaching (learning) and place. Hand in Land is similar, being different only in that it is on a child’s level.

For Thoreau, Walden Pond was more than his place. It was his laboratory for observation and experimentation—a library of data about geology, history, plants, animals, and bugs. Instead of a play opportunity, as a child would see it, it was his source of mature inspiration and renewal. The outdoor classroom we walked through that morning is Thoreau’s model applied, by chance or by design, at our school. I could see in this natural place a laboratory only a few steps from the brick and concrete school that, until this program was initiated, was far away from the intellect of the students.

As we meandered along, I made mental notes of the plants, landforms, and boulders that provided inspiration to the children in designing their models. I too saw the opportunity for creative play in connection with nature; the kind of play that creates memories similar to the ones that stay with me in maturity. In the richness of plant species I see the opportunity for learning about ecology and the influence of man on natural systems.

Cynthia Katz, one of the committee volunteers, and a plant expert, has pointed out a lesson in plant relationships. She found and identified many Swallow-wort plants in the study area. Swallow-wort is a vine that grows on shrubs and trees. The vine can kill a small tree by encircling the stem and halting the flow of water and nutrients between leaves and roots.

Thanks to Judy Keefe, Ron King, and the volunteers, the students may carry with them, for life, pleasant memories and a deeper appreciation of natural places as well as a stronger sense of creativity. My mind is certain that Hand in Land will guide the students in becoming better adult stewards of our land and resources. And, perhaps our community will adopt the model for a village wide plan to connect adults with natural places.