

## Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

### The Farm Kid Emerges

When the war came down on us in 1942 it was five years after my parents bought the farm on Burley Street. During those years I was growing up from 7 to 12 and as my father steadily built up his small farming operations I was increasingly drawn into them performing daily chores. Despite its small size, the farm offered all the tasks a kid growing up on a larger farm would be saddled with. I came to perform them all during the coming wartime years and became a real "farm kid". Unrealized during these years I acquired some marketable skills that served me well when at 14 I got my work permit and went looking for a paying summer job.

Our small farm was my father's dream, as I stated in an earlier essay, a nearly two year stint working 80 hour weeks on his aunt's dairy farm near New Bedford to support our small family in the depths of the Great Depression (1933-34) had somehow weaned him from his college trained career in business management and our 10 acre "farm" on Burley Street became a major part of his future.

It was too small to be a full time living but supplemented his depression era work driving a milk truck (from which job was home mid-afternoon giving him time to work on his farm), and in 1942 a new job managing the local Eastern States Farmers Exchange warehouse (now Agway) in nearby Putnamville. By war's end he had moved up to District Field Representative for Essex County and nearby Rockingham County, NH keeping him away from home longer days.

These changes in his life affected the scale and scope of his farming, but through them all I was growing up as a farm kid. The chores that gradually increased yearly were those any farm kid would be saddled with regardless of the farm size. Our farm had three distinct overlapping bases.

Chickens came first as the income from their eggs was to be used to pay off the mortgage loans that had enabled him to buy the place. The average yearly flock eventually came to number 100 egg laying hens and 100 young pullets which would grow into the next year's laying flock as he rotated them through annually, the older egg lay-

ers tapering off in egg production off to the butcher in Peabody, the younger growing into full time egg production.

Over the years my chores gradually encompassed daily collecting the eggs and feeding and watering the egg layers in the barn and the pullets in the fenced in one acre summer range up back in the "young orchard". This latter required wheelbarrowing 10 gallon milk jugs of water and 60 pound bags of grain 400' from the barn to the summer range a couple of times a week.

Seasonally I had to work at completely cleaning out the two barn coops (one each year, alternately upstairs and downstairs) of all the now solidly cemented (with droppings) floor litter, whitewash the walls and ceilings, and creosote the nests and sleeping roosts to fight off disease, readying them for the next year, and in spring help establish the newly arrived pullets in the summer range. This was not your everyday backyard hen yard, chickens in these numbers presented serious issues in disease control and flock behavior dynamics.

My father still carried the major load, of course, but as I grew up more and more of it became my responsibility. He left me a memento of those years when he passed on, his "egg scale". This little mechanical balance beam was used to grade the eggs by size into pullet, small, medium, large and extra large for crating up for market.

Almost every night after work he would go down cellar where he weighed the day's egg production and sorted it into the proper crates for pickup. With the full 100 egg laying hens at work producing maybe 80 eggs a day this added up to about 50 dozen a week, 500 to 600 eggs to be individually weighed. How many eggs did he weigh one at a time over those years? Maybe 20,000 plus a year! That it was all worth it to him is testified to with the note he left me with the scale. It reads:

"This egg scale was used to grade eggs for market during our poultry farm enterprise at Burley Street circa 1938-1945. After paying expenses the poultry income was used to pay off our mortgages in advance. This was accomplished in 6 or 7 years of a 12 year mortgage." It is a valued memento of how much effort my parents put into this home of ours we have now enjoyed for 62 years.

While the chickens came first, cows were a close second. Again small scale, only two or three, depending on the annual births needed to keep a freshened (milking) cow producing milk. The cows broadened my world beyond our farm as membership in the 4-H Club introduced me to other young people living similar lives in surrounding Essex County. It became a whole other world at home and now away.

Oh yeah, what was the third base? Vegetable gardening, in the war the victory garden grew large indeed with all its demands. More on both of these in my next essay.

