

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Cows & Vegetables

In 1938 when the chickens were established and hard at work paying off the mortgage, my father brought home a Guernsey heifer to set up a modest milk business serving our extended family needs. Soon milk, cream and butter were added to the eggs marketed to extended family members and friends (in addition to the wholesaling of the eggs). Lady Luck, this first producer, eventually became the grandmother of my very own 4-H Club project, Mayflower, in 1943. By that time I had had a lot of practice caring for his modest (three at the maximum) herd.

I found the cows much more rewarding than the chickens, they were friendly animals with personalities totally lacking in chickens. But they entailed much more daily labor to care for their needs. Milking twice daily was a major task as was cleaning out the gutter daily of the other product that cows deliver, a wheelbarrow or so daily wheeled away to the growing manure pile. And annually there was the haying.

I came to dread the end of school in June for haying soon began, long days out in the hot sun tossing with a pitchfork the freshly mowed (by a neighboring farmer) hay crop to help it dry (cure) before it could be stored in the small hayloft upstairs in the barn over the cow stable. My part of this latter operation was up in the small windowless loft catching each forkful my father tossed up from the trailer behind the old Hup. I would then stack each forkful in the prescribed manner so it would not slide off the pile as it reached towards the sloping barn roof overhead.

My membership in the 4-H Club had brought me into contact with other youth in Essex County who were learning about farming with cows. I got to go to the 4-H Summer Camp for a week at Mass State College in Amherst (then still pretty much a "cow college") and attended several fall fairs to take part in judging cows exhibited by club members. My Mayflower was not a purebred Guernsey so she was ineligible for exhibiting, so judging became my forte and I got rather good at it.

Summer of 1943, Mayflower and I.



At the time I was unaware that my father was socking away the income from the dairy farm operation for my future college education and it came to pass in 1947 that my first year at Northeastern University was, in part, funded by this.

The war years brought on food shortages and the Victory Garden came into being wherein everyone who had an available plot of land was encouraged to grow their own vegetables. We certainly had the room on our 10 acres and my father did not stint on growing "enough." For my mother this became an annual summer and fall of canning over a hot stove, racks holding five quart Mason jars with cut up vegetables in water were submerged in boiling water in the canning kettle and when sufficiently boiled to kill all "germs" the lids were sealed with wire clamps that squeezed them down onto a fresh new jar rubber. Hundreds of these preserves were stored in the cellar on shelving my father had built for the purpose (it's still there today but no home canned goods remain).

My part in all this was mostly spent on my hands and knees weeding what seemed to be endless row crops. Potatoes required special attention picking off the potato beetles that would destroy the leaves if left to themselves. When harvest time arrived we'd dig up the spuds and pack them in sand in bushel boxes in the cellar (it was cool there, not a root cellar but close enough), along with carrots and beets.

As I viewed the city kids from Peabody brought in daily to the market gardens surrounding us at the time, watching them get off the truck and onto their hands and knees to weed hundreds of rows that were truly endless, all day long, day after day, it had occurred to me that they were being paid (not much) for all that work. With 1944 coming up, my opportunity to enter into the wage earner world was at hand, in mid-January I would turn 14 and could obtain my work permit and look for an after school job paying cash income. It would be, not surprisingly, on a farm.

My sisters and I with my father in the vastness of our Victory Garden.

