

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Coming to Wenham in 1937 Looking for a Small Farm

Our family arrived in Wenham in March of 1937. The five of us had been living in Middleton in a house rented from Hayes Richardson, for whom my Dad also worked at that time, driving a milk truck for Richardson's dairy farm. Dad was struggling to regain a decent livelihood after losing his job in 1933 in the depths of the Great Depression. It had been a long fall for him, his education at Phillips Andover and Yale and subsequent career launched in business management at a large Boston contracting firm all coming to naught when he was laid off, as it did for some 25 million working people in the nation.

Our family initially found refuge on a small dairy farm down near New Bedford owned by Dad's aunt, where he discovered, despite his suburban upbringing in Melrose, that he liked this farming life even with its 80-hour weeks (4am-8pm with Sunday afternoon off between morning and evening chores). But it was too far from my mother's family in Peabody so in 1935 we came up to Middleton where he went work for Richardson.

Dad didn't much like pouring part of his meager wage into rent instead of equity in a home and so he visited a local realtor inquiring about where he might find a place where we could have our own small farm. To his surprise the realtor had just the place for him over in a nearby town called Wenham. It was ten acres with a six-room two-story frame house and a dilapidated two-story barn that could be had for only \$3,000.

Dad arranged to look at the place on a detour from his milk route and returned home to tell Mum that, "I don't know if you'll like it, it's way out in the country." The location on Burley Street, way out in the far western reaches of town, was indeed pretty rural with only three houses on the half-mile of the street within Wenham. We all then visited and approved and now it was time for the money part.

We had no money it seems (at seven I didn't know this) so Dad had to do some creative financing. With a loan of \$1,000 for a down payment from his father (still employed as a professional electrical engineer), he approached the Danvers Savings Bank, only to learn that the surviving banks by then really only wanted to lend money to those who did not need it. When confronted with this reality, the owner, anxious to move to greater downtown Wenham and not wishing to lose this live one, offered a second mortgage of \$1,000. With this in hand the bank relaxed and provided a 12-year mortgage for the remaining \$1,000. And so the deed was done and our family had the makings of my Dad's dream farm. It was going to take a lot of doing to realize this.

So what did we get for that \$3,000 of borrowed money? The ten acres consisted of about seven acres of fields with two small orchards, the "old orchard" and the "young orchard." The remaining three or so acres was a woodlot, most of it wetland populated by swamp maples. Dad saw the open land as free range for the planned flock (200) of chickens, hayfield and pasture for the planned cows (2), and a large vegetable garden for the table. The woodlot would serve its stated purpose, a source of fall and spring firewood for the coal fired hot air furnace in the house.

Burley Street was a tarred road (not the same as asphalt) and about a quarter-mile up the street it turned to dirt where it entered Danvers. It joined Maple Street with its twelve dwellings and the two streets and fifteen homes comprised the entire portion of town west of Topsfield Road (Route 97).

Our somewhat lonesome homestead abutted large truck garden acreage rented by the Speliotis brothers down on Maple Street on which they grew vegetables for the Boston produce market. George Perkins, the landowner up the street from us, had lost his dairy herd and barn (prior to our arrival) in a fire cause by a lightning strike and had resorted to renting out his acreage for a livelihood. There were also three other small family owned dairy farms on Maple Street, along with a couple of "estates" owned by the landed gentry.

We were two miles from the downtown Danvers business district, while South Hamilton's business district was four miles away beyond the "village" of Wenham. Not hard to see where most of our needs for food, supplies, banking, etc. came from. Our phone was on a Danvers circuit (2-party line) and our mail (RFD) was delivered from the Danvers Post Office. We were in effect quite isolated from Wenham's village, and this had a permanent effect on my growing up here during my school years.

The house would serve our basic living needs with three bedrooms, a minimal bathroom, a kitchen, dining and living room, water from a well, heat from a gravity circulation hot air furnace, and a big cast iron kitchen stove converted to kerosene fuel (the "glug-glug-jug"). A long list of indoor improvements Mum came up with would have to wait until the barn, slated to house rotating flocks of chickens intended to earn the income to pay off the mortgages, was saved from imminent collapse and put into usable shape to greet the first flock of 100 pullets that would arrive the coming spring. It was to be a busy summer for Dad with some help enlisted from an unemployed neighbor, Leonard Tracey, whose family rented an apartment in George Perkin's house. For my sisters and I it was still pretty much playtime, at seven I was not yet quite ready for prime time as a chore boy. It would soon come.

Dad was not a demonstrative man and it was many years later before he presented his now grown family with a note on what all this had meant to him:

"We will always remember our first Christmas here on Burley Street in 1937. All of our family (five of us) went down to our woodlot to pick out our Christmas tree. It was a white pine, not the traditional balsam fir. It was our symbol of our family at last owning our own home and small farm. A joyful event."

Next up, "What Manner of Town is This Wenham?"

Summer of 1937, Dad gets started on a new roof for the barn, first step in salvaging the old building for its new life as a home for 200 chickens.

