

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Moving up in the Working World

When my summer of '44 job on the farm ended I expected to be "out of work" for the coming school year, until in early fall, unexpectedly, opportunity knocked when I was offered Saturday and holiday work through the winter at a nearby estate, with full time summer work to follow in 1945. One of the bigger kids in the neighborhood was leaving the job for greener pastures and suggested me to the owners as his replacement. My interview met their approval and I was taken on at double my previous wages, \$2 each Saturday and holiday, \$10 each summer week, \$100 for the full ten week summer. I was going to be earning big time income at last!

Estate work would differ from the small farm work I had been doing since I was about 10. It was chiefly property maintenance for appearances, keeping the grounds surrounding the "big house" groomed; mowing lawns, raking gravel drives, rolling clay tennis courts, caring for the kitchen garden, washing and waxing two cars (a '39 Dodge coupe and '41 Plymouth sedan) and washing windows indoors on rainy days (there were a LOT of windows in the mansion).

Most of these tasks were over when winter came, but my new part-time school year job was to have a winter aspect, logging swamp maples from the property for the fireplaces. My boss, the estate caretaker, was a middle-aged Vermonter, a veteran of WWI, who had come to Massachusetts with his French war bride in search of more financially rewarding work. He didn't have much to say (ala Calvin Coolidge) but it was always to the point and we hit it off when he found my work ethic, honed by my earlier years of family chores and the summer farm job, met his standards.

The big house living room (more like a hall to me) sported a huge fireplace. I could almost stand up in it. Fuel for this was harvested from the property woodlot, much of which was wetland where swamp maples (ideal fireplace wood) grew profusely. Access to these had to await the swamp freezing over enough to support the weight of the one-ton 1932 Ford Model AA flatbed estate work truck with which we would haul the cut logs out to the woodshed behind the big house for cutting up into fireplace sized logs. I was expected to drive this (to me) monster across the trackless swamp over frozen hummocks and amongst the trees to those chosen for harvesting. The truck had a two-speed rear axle with a low range option, a full set of chains and lotsa ground clearance. My summer driving of the little John Deere tractor had introduced me to the demands of driving and I soon mastered this major upgrade in driving. I loved it!

By December the swamp had frozen over and the fall grounds cleanup (millions of leaves to rake and

haul away) was wrapped up, so we headed for the woods. This was logging old style, no chainsaws yet existed nor skidders to haul them out. The chosen tree was deeply notched with an axe on the side it was to be felled towards, then the two of us on the ends of a long two-man saw crouched down and made the horizontal cut into the tree trunk on the side opposite the notch and a bit above it. When our cut reached a point above the inner part of the notch a "hinge" was formed and the tree would topple (sometimes with a nudge) over, hopefully where we planned it and not get hung up on a nearby tree partway down.

We then lopped of the limbs, which were usually all at the tops of the closely spaced trees, with our axes and proceeded then with that two-man saw to cut the trunk into lengths for loading onto the truck. This latter task was a toughie, for the truck bed was almost at chest height and my boss at barely 5' and I, a skinny six footer, had to heft each log off the ground and swing it up onto the flatbed. It took some teamwork but we did it. Then I got to drive the loaded truck back out of the swamp to the woodshed where we would roll the logs off the sides alongside the waiting rusty old buzz saw.

We spent much of the winter on this job, until spring thaw made the swamp impassable once again. Now before spring cleanup of the grounds got underway, we would cut up the logs into fireplace lengths and stack them in the woodshed to dry out for a year. This task would be mechanized. The truck was lined up with the buzz saw so a rear wheel brake drum was aligned with the buzz saw belt pulley. The truck rear axle was jacked up, the rear wheel removed and a flat leather belt fitted over both the brake drum and the saw pulley. We were now ready to roll, the truck engine was started and shifted into gear and the speed was set with the hand throttle on the steering column, and the buzz saw got buzzin'.

Initially this was an intimidating job as we hosted each log onto the carriage and swung it into the buzzing blade until a section dropped to the ground but I soon became accustomed to its deadly presence. The large pile of logs we had built up throughout the winter took a while (several Saturdays) to cut up into shorter lengths but it sure beat doing it with the two-man saw. Good thing there was no OSHA around in those days to interfere with our task.

When summer came I'd begin earning big money working 40-hour weeks, but the really big event in my 15th year was the end of WWII, when Japan surrendered in August and the neighborhood celebrated with what we came to call our very own "Towering Inferno". Next issue...