

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

What Manner of Town is This Wenham? – Part 3

And now about those demographics: This final look at the nature of Wenham in 1937, just four years prior to the oncoming WWII that would engulf the country, is about the demographics, “statistics relating to the population and the groups within it.” Not too difficult a research project for a small town the size of Wenham with no industry or significant businesses.

Essentially Wenham had three major “population groups within it:” the wealthy landowners, the working class villagers (with a scattering of professionals) and a smaller group of farmers, once not too long before the majority of the population, but now fading fast from the scene as the town became what Mrs. Adeline Cole described in her *Notes on Wenham History* (1943) as a “residential town, a place to establish a home to which to return after the day’s work is over, a place to bring up their children, a town of homes.”

The wealthy landowner cohort was not a large one but owned a lot of property so contributed in a really big way to the town’s well being with the taxes they paid. A summary of the top 20 taxpayers in town in 1937 reveals that they collectively paid about \$30,000 in real estate and personal property taxes, about 45% of the total tax collected that year of about \$69,000. This, in effect, was a huge subsidy to the working class villagers and small farmers, substantially reducing what would have been their taxes. But while the wealthy benefitted from most of the various town services (fire, police, highways etc.) they did not take advantage of the town’s major service (and biggest budget expense), the schools, as they sent their children to private schools, North Shore Country Day in Beverly in particular.

An additional benefit to the town was (and still is) the open space of their large estates providing many pleasing vistas of Wenham countryside viewed by any and all when traveling town roads. Furthermore, the many activities of the Village Improvement Society since the beginning of the 20th century to improve the experience of living in town for those of lesser means were organized and funded by women from this wealthy

cohort. Mrs. Cole ranked 17th amongst that top 20 taxpayers. She and her companions, who were striving to improve aspects of town life that they perceived as needing it, certainly did not need to do this, it was a form of noblesse oblige, doing good.

The working class villagers were by far the largest cohort, pretty much concentrated in the village that grew up over 300 years around Wenham Center. Most went off to work every day out of town to Beverly, Salem, Lynn and even to Boston. Train and bus service got many there and back each day to the “Shoe” (the United Shoe Machinery Co, USMC, known locally as “Useless Sons Made Comfortable”), in Beverly and the “Generous Electric” in Lynn. Others, of course, went off daily to jobs in retail businesses and service industries out of town. Few jobs were to be found in town, those available were chiefly to be found on wealthy estates and the small farms.

A smaller cohort of the town’s working class lived at Idlewood Lake (now Pleasant Pond) at the end of Pleasant Street, many of whom had moved there into what was then, in effect, the town’s “affordable housing district.” Affordable because the houses were old summer cottages (now many rentals during the Depression) built at this former summer holiday spot on Idlewood Lake, never intended for year round habitation. But they were cheap and could be “winterized” by lining interior walls with newspapers and similar dodges.

The town tax listing for 1937 placed all of these Idlewood Lake properties (about 40 cottages/camps) in a separate section at the end of the main alphabetical listing. No reason was given for this separation from the main taxpayer list in this Town Report and I did not go hunting for one in prior reports, but it reflected the fact that Idlewood Lake was regarded somehow as “a different part of town.”

Many living there had large families and the neighborhood was a tightly knit community in which they helped one another out when need arose. They even had a convenience store at the beach on the lake catering to visiting summer swimmers as well as year round residents.

Idlewood Lake was pretty much out of sight and mind to the rest of the town, but schoolmates of mine who lived downtown often had been cautioned by their parents to never go down to the end of Pleasant Street. Those of us on the West Wenham school bus went there twice daily during the school years and I do not recall in seven years of so doing any overt action from there that justified this cautionary attitude. They were just the Idlewood kids to us.

The remaining small family farms were a steadily shrinking cohort as the difficulties of making a living on small farms during the Great Depression inexorably drove them off their land, usually into the ranks of the unemployed or out of town altogether. These farms were widely scattered around town with many in West Wenham. My previous History Page noted that there were ten dairies in town that were monitored by the Board of Health for milk quality, and a couple of chicken farms large enough to be viewed as commercial (600 and 900 fowl each). Small farming as a livelihood was on its way out but lingered on during my youth, providing some opportunities for after school and summer vacation jobs.

So this was how things appeared to be in Wenham in 1937 upon our arrival. Over the next ten years (through the WWII years) my life revolved around family home life, school days and, when I reached 14 and could obtain a work permit, going to work after school and on summer vacations to earn some income for the future college education my parents envisioned for me. As my family and home life existed within the farming “community” I’ll get to this later on when farming comes up for discussion. The immediate next “Big Thing” in my life was seven years of “School Days,” my next topic in this ongoing series.