

The Dennison District School

The Dennison District School was built in 1849 to replace the school that was destroyed by fire in 1847. There were three schools constructed of wood in the Dennison area between 1754 and 1847, all of the schools were lost by fire. For obvious reasons, it's quite clear why the last Dennison School was built with bricks.

Most former students still living today will describe the school as a well kept building inside and out, with a well-liked understanding teacher, someone like you would see on the TV shows "The Little House on the Prairie" or the "Waltons". But that was not always the case.

Mrs. Stella Wood Gay, the last teacher at Dennison School wrote a good history of the school after she retired in 1936. She quotes from the school committee report in the late nineteenth century, "The school after many years of use and neglect, has only a few dingy outline maps hanging from the walls. A Webster's dictionary, a numeral frame and poor blackboards constitute the utensils for aiding the ingenuity of the teacher."

Harry Mason, now deceased, was brought up in the Westville area. He moved to the West Coast and sent stories to the local newspaper describing what life was like in his youth and what he heard from the old timers. He said the school had as many as 43 students ranging in age from 5 to 20 years. Some were hard-boiled and it was customary to throw the teacher in the snow bank when the snow piled up around the door.

Mrs. Gay also writes that there were twenty teachers between 1849 and 1907 at Dennison, and the school was closed between 1894 and 1902 for lack of students. That's a little less than three years per teacher.

Knowing all of this, does it sound like a little school on the prairie? (The stories of Mrs. Gay and Mr. Mason, will be found elsewhere in this book)

In 1907 all of this was about to change. The Southbridge School Committee voted to hire Miss Stella Wood, a young lady fresh out of Normal School at age 19 for \$6.00 per week, to teach at Dennison School.

Who was this young lady? What did she know about teaching? Could she handle the young kids who had a way of handling teachers? Time would tell.

Miss Stella Wood (Gay) was born on June 24, 1888. Her parents were George and Jennie (Chase) Wood. They lived in what was then known as Shuttleville and is now a part of the Westville dam control area.

Shuttleville, was so named because of the Litchfield Shuttle Company located there. The Company of 300 to 400 workers made shuttles for the Textile Industry and was known world wide and was reputed to be the largest in the world.

What was life like in 1888 when Miss Wood was born? Four years earlier the cotton mill in Westville had burned and people were still talking about the blizzard of '88, just three months prior.

There were no cars, trucks, busses, chain saws, power lawn mowers, snowmobiles or anything else that used gasoline. Without electricity there were no electric flat irons, water pumps, washing machines or vacuum cleaners. The list could go on and on. It surely must have been quiet! No, you didn't have these noisy things, but there was something else. The farmers could be heard chopping wood in the nearby forest. There was also the rattling of lumber wagons, bringing wood to the farm yard. (Page 36 & 40) You have all heard the modern kids sing the Old MacDonald song. Well, this was the real thing, without the kids. Their noise will come later. The fathers along with the older boys would throw the wood from the wagon onto the wood pile, making more noise.

Large families of 8 to 13 children were quite common for the times, and there was plenty to do around the family farm. Daily chores were feeding and watering the animals, milking the cow(s) and getting eggs. There was also seasonal work, such as planting the garden and haying and weeding the garden all summer long. In the fall there was harvesting and filling the woodshed in preparation for the long cold winter.

Spring, summer, and fall there was always plenty of work at the woodpile. Besides the wood, there was a sawbuck and a bucksaw (Page 40) for cutting the wood to stove length and an ax and chopping block for splitting the wood.

Any kid that was strong enough to lift the wood on to the sawbuck could cut the wood, but only the oldest boys were allowed to split it as this was a rather dangerous task.

Father usually did this himself. This writer's brother, Lawrence, age five, thought

he could split the wood with the aid of his three year old sister Anna. The results of this good deed ended with sister Anna almost losing her finger, and to this day she cannot wear a ring on the ring finger of her left hand.

After splitting the wood, it was everyone's job, young and old, to get it into the wood shed. If the shed had a window that could be removed, it could be carried by the armload and then thrown in. Most often it was carried part of the way and then thrown in, missing its mark and hitting the shed making such a loud noise that it would send the hens scattering for safety with the family dog after them.

To add to this, there was bickering and fighting over who was doing the least or the most work. Mother could hear all of this from the kitchen. When she had had enough, she would go to the barn and emerge with a choice strap from a harness of one of the horses. (Page 40) There was more noise at the wood pile, but this time it was from the strap, then all was quiet. Are these good old days? The days one would rather forget? How about the days nobody can forget?

When these children grew up and had families of their own and gathered at Christmas or other holidays, there was great laughter over the events at the woodpile or of other things of bygone days. However, it was with great admiration that they spoke of their mother who had a heart of pure gold. She could say just the right words or give a hug to an upset child or an older person with a problem. They remembered this love and cherished it. But they would rather talk about the "Lady with a strap". It brought back great memories.

The mode of transportation was by horse and buggy, (Page 40) and most often by walking. When passing a neighbors house, the farmer might be out doing his chores. The wife might be out hanging clothes or gathering apples in her apron for an apple pie. It was quite common to stop for a greeting and to exchange the news of the day. If a calf was born it was bigger news than when a baby was born.

These were the GOOD OLD DAYS!



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e's also a song that goes like this:

He holds the lantern while his mother chops the wood

He helps his mother like a good boy should

If someone heard of another neighbor buying something new or used, like a horse drawn plow, hay rake, or even a butter chum, this was also good news. Not everyone owned all of these items back then, so they borrowed from one another. This created good friendship.

As the visitor left, the farmer's wife would give him/her one of the Baldwin apples to eat along the way. It was a story like this that inspired the song that Barbara Streisand sang, "People needing people are the happiest people in the world". When everyone was in bed fast asleep, it was very quiet. There weren't any large noisy trucks on the Mass. Pike or police cars and fire trucks with blaring sirens.

Every farmer had his own alarm clock, one that didn't have to be wound or set nor did it need batteries. Their alarm clock was the king of the hen house or better known as the big red rooster. Every morning at the crack of dawn, the rooster would jump from his perch, stretch, ruffle his feathers and crow "Cock a doodle doo". In hen coop lingo it meant, "Get up all of you". The rooster kept this up until his harem of hens rose up and began producing eggs. This crowing also awoke the farmer and everyone else, alerting them to start a new day. The rooster would then hop back on his perch for an extra 40 winks before feeding time.

The chickens eventually had the last laugh as the rooster would lose his head at the chopping block to make a special dinner when company came.



The big Rooster was proud of his Harem and especially of this Hen.

What a Hen

NORTH BROOKFIELD—This hen, one of the 13 owned by J. J. Warren set a new laying record for cross breeds at the Storrs Egg Laying Test at the University of Connecticut. She laid 337 eggs, the highest individual total in the test. It was the fourth win for the Warren farm in the 48 years the test has been given.

The Westville Cash Store was the first store in Sturbridge of which there are records. It sold groceries, cloth for the women, bib overalls for the men, tobacco products and food for cattle.

There was penny candy for the woodpile gang. The warm pot-bellied stove in the middle of the store was a great place for the locals to sit around on cracker barrels. They analyzed the gossip and told stories, some true and some otherwise. Smoke from their pipes and hand rolled cigarettes blended together with the smoke from the stove when the lid was opened to add more wood. Children on errands to the store for their parents liked to listen for a while. If they heard something interesting, they would take it home to pass it along with what ever they had bought that day.

The store did good business with the horse drawn and walking traffic. It was not unusual for a person to walk four to eight miles each way to work in Southbridge or at the Shuttle Shop. Heavy wagons carried cordwood and lumber from saw mills that dotted the area, some as far as Mashapaug, Breakneck and Bigelow Hollow. The Hyde's Box Shop, 3/4 of a mile up the old Mashapaug Road, received all of its raw material via wagon. They made shipping boxes and wooden pails. Most of this was shipped through Westville to the railroad station in Southbridge.

Young boys hanging around the store enjoyed the rough and ready teamsters who would kid with them as they entered the store.

Near the Box Shop there was a wooden watering trough for horses, and a steel trough was near the Shuttle Shop. Both troughs were spring fed. The remains of the troughs are still there. A good guess today is that there would be a wagon going through Westville about every 5 or 10 minutes.

The Blacksmith shop, (Page 42) located between the bridge and the river bend, was operated by Mr. Charles Anger, maternal grandfather of the large Laliberte family. (There will be more about the Laliberte's later). Wagons, buggies and farm equipment were repaired. Young boys liked to stop there and watch the way different things were repaired. If the blacksmith was kicked by a horse while it was being shod, the boys would learn some words to add to their vocabulary, ones they wouldn't learn at Sunday school. It was also a good place to get a discarded wagon wheel and use it to make a rolling hoop. If a boy had mechanical abilities, he'd be helpful to the blacksmith in doing odd jobs and running errands. In return he could get help and parts to build a coaster wagon from some old baby carriage wheels or some steel for a double-runner sled.

The river also was a great place for the boys. Three or four logs nailed together with scrap boards made a good raft. Long poles were used to push it up and down the river. They could also fish from the raft. In the winter, the most daring kid would go up stream and break off a big chunk of ice. He would then run to the bridge and as it went by he would jump from the bridge to the floating ice for a ride down stream. Little kids caught pollywogs and frogs in shallow water coves.

This all sounds dangerous and it was, but parents were too tied up with their own work and problems to even give it a thought. However, if the kid was caught on the ice this meant a trip to the wood shed. If a ball couldn't be had to play baseball, they played peggie. All you needed for this game was a piece of firewood about one inch in diameter and six inches long sharpened to a point and a bat made of the same material about three feet long. The short peg was put in a small hole in the ground with the point projecting out at about a 30° angle. The object of the batter was to strike the peggie with the bat, causing it to fly several feet straight up into the air. As the peggie was coming down, a second swing would hit the peggie sending it flying to the out field. Any number of players could be in the out field and if one caught it, the batter would be out and he would have his turn at bat. If it wasn't caught, the one who got to the peggie first would throw it back, and if it landed within a bats length of the hole, he would be the next batter. If not, the batter would use the bat to measure the distance to the peg and would receive one point for each bat length. The rules of playing differed from one neighborhood to another. Anyone could join the game at anytime. Darkness ended the game or someone showed up with a ball to play baseball. They already had the homemade bat, and there were plenty of stones around for bases.

There weren't any organized sports, such as little leagues, Pop Warner football, basketball or hockey. Everything was centered around the largest family in the neighborhood or the river.

Around 1913 the Southern New England Railroad, commonly known as the "Grand Trunk", started building a railroad from Palmer, Massachusetts to Providence, Rhode Island, which was to pass through Westville. Land for the railroad right-of-way was bought from local residents, and a field of 1 ½ acres on the St. Germain farm which would have been cut-off from the rest of the farm was also purchased by the Grand Trunk. The Grand Trunk Railroad was never completed, so this little field became a ball field for the local kids.

In 1931 this writer's father, the late Anthony Boniface, bought the St. Germain farm, and a few years later he bought a ½ mile stretch of the abandoned railroad right-of-way along with the ball field. He continued to let the kids use the field until it was sold to the U.S. Corp of Engineers for the flood control dam and recreation area. It has always been known locally as "The Ball Field" .

This "Ball Field" today is much the same as it was back in the roaring twenties. It is located west of the comfort station in the recreation area with stone walls on it's east and north sides and the railroad right-of-way on the west side. It's not a nice flat field like the kids have today, but it was the best to be had back then. Other level fields in the area were valued too much for the hay crops or gardens.

The Westville boys would sometimes organize a game with the Servant family and their gang on Breakneck Road or the gang around the Sturbridge Common. However, most ball playing was a pick-up team of the local kids. Usually a lost ball or darkness ended the game, and it was time for refreshments at the Westville store or Clark Porter's garage. Mr. Porter ran a fruit and vegetable business with a delivery truck, which he kept in his two car garage. He also had an assortment of five cent candy bars, orange kiss soda, and table talk pies. which were about ten inches in diameter and cost ten cents. The quart bottle of soda was also ten cents. It was quite common for two boys to split a soda and a pie. Mr. Porter would supply glasses and a knife. He enjoyed the boys company as the boys enjoyed his. He told stories of his younger days as a teamster.

Fishing the Quinebaug River was not just a pastime or sport because if there was good luck it also meant a good meal. Very few boys had a real fishing outfit, and even if they could afford one with their meager savings, there were better things to be had. A wood pole cut beside the river, a piece of string and a bent safety pin worked just as well and the fish didn't know the difference. The bait was always the garden variety of fish worms. After the fishing expedition, the fish were strung on a forked stick for carrying home. The line was wrapped around the end of the pole and broken off. He put the line in his back pocket hook and all and if the catch was good, whistled his way home. The fishing line was one of many things mothers found in boys pockets on wash day. Fish caught in the river were trout, horned pout, pickerel. and kivers (sunfish), the latter was for the cat. One thing that hasn't changed to this day is 10% of the boys catch 90% of the fish regardless of the equipment.

Shortly after the turn of the century, there was a different sound in the Shuttleville neighborhood. In the summer, on hot days, it came from the shade of an apple tree and

if it was raining, it came from the big open door of the barn or from a porch. In the winter it came from inside the house around the kitchen table. The kids were playing school, and the teacher would be no one other than the teenage Stella Wood. Besides her older brother, Charlie, she had a five-year-old sister Louise. Younger kids like her sister were soon bored and she encouraged them to stay by giving them little tasks, like passing out paper, sort of a teacher's aid. Older kids like her brother were a bigger problem. They would rather be climbing trees, playing peggie, or finding something more exciting down by the river. They played school like it or not and behaved. They knew that she knew and their parents didn't know how some outside toilets got tipped over on Halloween or who stole cabbages the night before to roll down the hills on the day that today is know as "trick or treat". Little did the neighbors know that a little candy could keep the kids from waxing their windows and putting their porch furniture up in the tree. There were also kids that crossed the Quinebaug on thin ice as it was a shortcut to the store. These were her best students and their parents never knew otherwise and school kept.

Suddenly and surprisingly there was a strange noise coming from the road from Westville. It was one of those new fangled automobiles. (Page10) It seemed to be propelled by a cloud of smoke and dust and it made a banging and sputtering sound unlike any of the farm animals and there wasn't a horse in sight. Farmers dropped their scythe, rake, or stopped whatever they were doing and hustled to a better vantage point. The class was out of order and the kids were on the run. Louise and the other little ones cried, "Wait for me, wait for me." Housewives ran from the kitchen with their aprons on and screen door slamming behind, trying to stop the kids, as these things were known to blow up, but it was of no use. Stella was leading the pack.

It was now rounding the curve at the river bend and heading for Shuttle Shop Hill. Stella's father worked at the Shuttle Shop and saw it all from the open window. The kids were not far behind, and their hopes were if it couldn't make the hill, they would push and probably be rewarded with a ride. But it had a good start and part way up there was a clashing of gears, more noise, and it sputtered over the top. The kids were somewhat disappointed, but the boys thought it was as good as a modern day bomb scare. Back then it wasn't ladylike to like such contraptions, but secretly Stella hoped to own one someday.



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Rambler**



THOSE GOOD OLD OPEN CARS

PROVIDED MUCH MORE SHELTER THAN
THEY APPEARED TO

On September 3, 1907, Miss Wood started her first day as a teacher at the Dennison District School. Leaving home, she started her mile walk on South Street carrying her lunch and well prepared lessons for the class. She wore an ankle length skirt and high button shoes that were the style of the times. A modern day teacher would be wearing blue jeans and sneakers because of the dirt roads. It was a nice fall day and the maple trees had just turned bright red along the Quinebaug River. She loved nature, and this added to her good frame of mind.

Turning left on South Hill Road, which is now discontinued, is not a bright and cheery a prospect. The oak trees that hang over the road block the sun and the leaves are starting to turn brown. The lack of houses also makes it lonely.

Miss Wood's thoughts turn to herself. This is not play school, it is the real thing. Are her lessons well prepared? Will she be able to hold the students' attention all day? Can she handle those rowdy kids that have a way of handling teachers? She knows of two Lockhart boys and one is not known for his good behavior. As she reaches the top of the hill where the road joins Dennison Drive, the scenery changes. There are fields on both sides of the road. The sun shines bright and the trees in the distance show their bright fall colors. There is a small farm on the right and a farmer working in his corn field waves to her. She waves back and notices the corn that he is cutting is brown in color.

All this changes her thoughts into more pleasant and positive ones, and a poem comes to mind:

The golden rod is yellow,
The corn is turning brown,
The trees in orchard meadow,
With fruit are bending down.

There are more verses about the changes in the fall season. She would write the poem one line at a time on the blackboard. The older students would copy and memorize it, and the younger students would be asked to bring in something that nature changed in the fall. The first graders would draw an apple and color it red. In doing all of this, the whole class learned from the poem.

Miss Wood turned right at the fork in the road onto Dennison Lane. The first house on the left was the home of Eusebe (Zeb) Laliberte. The present house across the road was once his barn. He had a family of seven and five of them were to be in her first class of 1907. Four of the children were boys, Eusebe Jr.(Zebby), Cyril, Louis, Frank and one girl, Corinne Laliberte Beaudreau, who was to become her substitute teacher from 1926-1930. After that she would teach at Marcy Street School and River Street School in Southbridge. (The elder Mrs. Zeb Laliberte's father, Mr. Charles Anger, ran the blacksmith shop in Westville.)

The next house on the left, just before the school, was the Walker farm. There would be four Walker children in her class. These were Vernon, Louisa, Newell and Almeda. Another Walker child, Henry, Jr. was yet to be born, but he would attend Dennison School starting in 1918. Readers, please note: You will not be asked to walk to school with the teacher every day, throughout her tenure.

When Miss Wood arrived at the school, there weren't any students there. She was very early and wanted everything in "apple pie" order before the students arrived. After unlocking the school and letting herself in, she raised the flag high above the door. She then unlocked both doors to the boys and girls outside toilets. Returning to the classroom, she marked each desk where each student was to sit. She would later have the older students, who could read, guide the first graders to their seats.

As the students arrived, some of the girls came into the school and all the boys and some other girls remained outside. At the right hour, one of the girls rang the bell and the kids tramped in, with Miss Wood at the door. Once they were all seated, she introduced herself and told them it was her first day as a teacher. She said a lot of children don't like school, especially boys. If we all did our very best, we could all learn together and it could be fun. A few questions and answers and school was ready to begin. First they saluted the flag, sang the national anthem, and with heads bowed, they recited the Lord's prayer.

She then proceeded to pass out her prepared assignments, and all the students paid close attention. Things were going very well and she was proud of herself. Mr. Lockhart was bored. He wasn't used to such organization. He thought it was time to cut up and cut up he did! In a flash the teacher was at Lockhart's side. In seconds both were in the hall. What went on behind the closed door of the hall cannot be reported. But from that time on, Master Lockhart set the standard at Dennison School for good behavior. After that, things went along much as planned. There was time out for recess, the lunch break and a mid afternoon recess.

Miss Wood wrote the poem on the blackboard and instructed the class on what to do. All had a good day. Class dismissed.

A second grader came home and told her mother about the nice day at school and all about the poem. Looking out the window, she saw her father picking apples. Mom she asked excitedly, "Can I bring an apple and daddy to school tomorrow?" Mother replied, "No, not daddy, only apples are for the teacher."

From 1930 to 1936 this writer and his three brothers were among the last to attend Dennison School. We all agree it was the kind of school you'd find on the TV series, "The Little House on the Prairie".

Outside in the School yard there was a hand pump piped from an artesian well, a wood shed, duplex toilets for boys and girls and three swings hanging from a pipe "A" frame. (Pages 17 & 34) In the hall, as you entered the door, were hooks to hang coats and a coal bin to the rear left. The floor was covered with a steel mat to wipe off muddy shoes. It could be rolled up and removed for easy sweeping.

As you entered the classroom, there were 27 desks facing the door. In the rear was a large stove, wood box and a cabinet for supplies and an assortment of games for use inside in bad weather. Up front was a work table, foot pumped organ and a good assortment of rolled down maps. To the left front was a walk-in closet for book storage and other supplies. Near the closet was the desk and captain's chair for the teacher. On the desk was a hand bell to start the school day and a little bell which was used if the teacher wanted the attention of the whole class. Usually there was an apple on the desk brought in by a student to insure a good day. This worked, but it also had limitations. Within easy reach, for the teacher, was her wooden pointer with a rubber tip on the end. Whenever she used it viscusly to emphasize a point, the tip flew off. Later she would reattach it with sticky tape that had to be wet with her tongue.

In one section of the schoolroom was a small table and chair set. This is where each grade had their reading lessons. There was also a wind up Victrola that was used for inspirational sound relating to the reading material. The schoolroom was clean, well kept, and cheerful.

Mrs. Gay was now a seasoned teacher with 20 years of teaching experience. She was married with a teenage daughter and a 3-year-old son, this gave her an even better understanding of children. With her self-taught motivational skills, she was able to get the most out of her students regardless of their abilities. They wanted to learn and to please her.

Several times each year Miss McGrath, (soon to become Mrs. Rubenstein) a music teacher would come and give singing lessons. Mrs. Gay could also play the organ and taught the students to read music. The whole class participated and singing was a big part of the schooling at Dennison School and the children enjoyed it. When the music teacher came on her next round, she was very pleased with the progress.

Art lessons were taught by Miss Beattie of the Southbridge school system. This was a real treat for the students. During the depression year of 1931, her funds for taxi fare were cut off. She was so inspired by Mrs. Gay and her students, she walked the six miles round trip to continue the art lessons. She also was an exceptional teacher.

Throughout the school year there were activities relating to the holidays or the seasons. In February there would be stories and skits about the great presidents. Valentine's Day would be a fun day with candy, refreshments, and valentines. The teacher always received the most valentines. On June 14, there would be skits on how the American flag was inspired, what the stars, stripes, and colors represented. On Thanksgiving there would be stories and skits about the pilgrims and why it became a national Holiday. There was a standing invitation for anyone who wished to attend these events. (Page 18 & inside Back Cover)

Christmas was the social event of the Dennison District School area, and it would take more than a snow storm to miss this day. There was a part in the play for the shyest first grader to the oldest student with Hollywood ambitions. The teacher made sure everyone knew their part. There could be no slip ups on this day. The school would be decorated with seasonal silhouettes on the windows. A large red paper bell hung from the ceiling with a paper chain made from red and green paper that went from corner to corner. The highlight of the room was the Christmas tree. Besides the tinsel and ornaments, it had electric lights powered by a six volt automobile battery. This was supplied and hooked up by J. Williams Barnes, an electrical contractor from Southbridge and a good friend of the school family. Mrs. Butterworth, the teacher's sister, and Mrs. Gay's daughter Doris, drew colored pictures of Christmas scenes on the blackboard.

In later years, a make believe microphone, made by Mr. Walter Gay, was set up front for the student master of ceremonies. It was made from the sprinkler head of a sprinkler can and was attached to a small box with the Dennison District School call letters, DDS, printed on it. This was attached to the base with a broom stick. It was so realistic, that some people thought it was a live broadcast.

The teacher's desk and the organ would be moved to the back of the classroom. Chairs borrowed from the Walker family next door were placed around the room. Invitations had been made by the students and received by the parents and guest of honor. Everything was ready. Guests arrived and were greeted and seated. The teacher was at the organ, students were ready, and the master of ceremonies was at the microphone. Let's get on with the show!

The master of ceremonies made opening remarks and on came the lights on the Christmas tree. Most people in the district didn't have electricity yet so this was like lighting the National Christmas tree on the White House lawn.

Pieces were recited, Carols sung, and skits and pageants performed all to great applause. The highlight for the children was singing of Jingle Bells and then Santa Claus came bursting in through the door.

Does this sound like a Rogers & Hammerstein Broadway Musical? Yes, the writer would like you to think so, because everyone in the audience thought their child was the star in the show.

When Santa's bag was empty and each student had a gift, courtesy of the teacher. Santa would then go to the Christmas tree and again call each student to him. Each student would receive a 5 or 10 cent gift from his/her classmate. This was arranged early in the season so the students had plenty of time to buy just the right gift for the student that he/she had chosen.

A former student, Arthur Laliberte, one of seven children of Zeb Laliberte, who received his primary education at Dennison School from Mrs. Gay, was Santa.

To finish off the social event of the year, refreshments were put out for all. There was ribbon candy, gum drops, candy canes, lollipops for the preschoolers, and the Christmas fruit, an orange. Parents praised and thanked the teacher for her great Christmas pageant and said their good-bye's. Students went home with their parents and their two gifts and plenty of candy that they hadn't finished. Did they thank their teacher? No, Santa Claus was the hero! Their beaming faces were the kind of thanks that never could be put into words.

We must remember these were the days of large families and mothers couldn't work. Children would be lucky to get one gift at Christmas. More often a sled, clamp on ice skates, or a checkerboard game had to be shared. Two gifts on the same day, and it wasn't even Christmas yet! It was really the season to be jolly, and these were the depression days.

"The Great Depression" from 1929-1939 was blamed on the stock market crash of 1929. Large cities had as much as 30% unemployment. To make matters even worse, there wasn't any unemployment compensation, Social Security, or health and accident insurance. Americans worked until they saved enough to retire, which was very rare, or until their health gave out. Young people then had to take care of their parents. If the children couldn't take care of them, they had to go to the poor house, which every town and city was required to have.

In 1932, 15,000 unemployed veterans of World War 1, marched in Washington to demand their bonus, which they were to receive in 1945. They petitioned the legislators to pay them now, after all, the war had been over for 14 years and they needed the money. The Senators said it was financially impossible and voted it down. The veterans who were living in tents and shacks on public grounds refused to leave the Capitol. President Herbert Hoover ordered the U.S. Army to force them out. When they still didn't leave, the soldiers fired on them killing and wounding many. The years of 1932 and 1933 were the worst and saddest days of the depression.

Southbridge and Sturbridge did not have problems anywhere near as bad as just described. People that were unemployed were able to get work at the American Optical Company. They were hiring all through the depression. However, it wasn't as easy as all that. A person had to first make out an application and then wait for an interview. The company would then put his name on a waiting list. If he didn't have a trade or special skill, he could wait several months before an opening could be found for him. In the meantime, he would go from one shop to another looking for work. If he didn't have a car, all he could do was go home and report to his wife that he had sore feet. These were the depression days he would long remember, even though he eventually found work and did better than in the 1920's.

Young people remember the good times of the "Roaring Twenties" when you could buy a Model T Ford, five-passenger touring car for \$290.00. It didn't have windows and the engine had to be cranked by hand, but it was still better than the horse and buggy. They could drive to a speakeasy, drink bootleg booze, and dance the Charleston or the Lindy Hop, which was so named because of Charles Lindbergh's historical flight to Paris.

Later in the 1930's, these same people had a family and for a little more money, a closed Model A or V 8 Ford was available. Mother wanted a white stove to replace the black cast iron one that had been good enough for so many years. (Page 40) Boys wanted a baseball glove, girls wanted a doll carriage for their doll, and none of the kids wanted to go barefoot in the summer anymore. Even though Father still had a job, these were tough times. These same people today look back at the good times of the "Roaring Twenties" and the tough times of the depression years.

Some people today compare the lifestyle of today to the years of the depression. That was when cars didn't start in cold weather and washing clothes and hanging them on the line and freezing before a clothespin could be attached. Carrying a 2 ½ gallon jug of Kerosene up two flights of stairs. Waiting in the cold and rain for a bus that was often late, knowing that you would be late for work. Taking care of a garden, in the hot sun, and sharing the garden with a woodchuck who also had a family to feed. This was not the fault of the depression but the living conditions of the times and it lasted well into the war years of the 1940's.

In large cities where there was widespread unemployment and no place to have a cow or garden, there was a serious problem of frustration and crime. It would seem it was a bigger crime to let your family starve than to go out and steal for them.

President Herbert Hoover put into effect several good plans to help farmers and keep them from losing their farms and businesses and banks from going into bankruptcy. It was the first time the country had gone into such a deep depression, and there was nothing that could be learned from the past.

In 1932 Franklin Roosevelt was elected president, and between 1932 and 1939 he put into effect more than 39 new agencies. These agencies such as the REA. (Rural Electrification Administration), WPA (Work Progress Administration), CCC (Civilian Conservation Corp), and TVA, (Tennessee Valley Authority). These agencies affected just about everyone in some way or another. Banks, businesses, and institutions also played a big part and just about everyone was back to work.

In 1932, nationwide only 11 % of farms had electricity and by 1962, 97 % of the farms were wired. Large dams were built on major rivers for hydro electric power, flood

control and irrigation. Even unemployed artists were commissioned by the WPA to create works of art that are greatly in demand by collectors today. After all, the president said, "Artists have to eat too".

In Sturbridge, roads were widened and paved sidewalks were built along Route 131 and play grounds improved around the schools. In Southbridge, three new schools were built. West Street, Eastford Road and Charlton Street schools were built and these are just some of the things that show how the town benefitted from these programs.

The depression seemed to have little effect on the operation of Dennison School, except for the taxi fair for the art teacher. However, this writer, as a student, would not have been aware of any budget cuts, if there were any others.

One of the biggest benefactors of Dennison School was J. William Barnes. (Page 35) He was the electrical contractor that wired the Christmas tree during the Christmas season at the school. He was a tall, kind, generous, soft spoken man, who had a summer cottage in a wooded area near the school. Mr. Barnes loved nature and did everything he could to protect the habitat of the wild animals around his cottage. Among his many interests were trains, photography, and gardening. Besides fruit and vegetables, he cultivated many types of flowers.

He also preserved many wild flowers around his cottage and built a little man made pond. He used a hydraulic ram water pump that didn't require electricity, gasoline, or any source of outside power to pump water several hundred feet up to irrigate his garden. His cottage was wired for electricity and powered by batteries with an output of 32 volts and charged by a gasoline powered generator. Besides his dog he had a pet alligator that he kept in a little pond fed by a fountain. His many mechanical abilities and his love for the outdoors made him a very interesting and likable man.

Throughout the school year, one of his workers would stop at the school to drop off a jigsaw puzzle or some popcorn balls for a treat at recess. Sometimes he would stop to show a rare flower that had just bloomed. This was something that he thought was extraordinary.

He always had something special for the whole class for the Christmas season. One year there was a baseball game for indoor use. It had a little bat for the player to hit a ball attached to a spring loaded stem. There was a way of keeping score for individual teams. Other times there would be Lincoln logs, an erector set, a small typewriter, or a little sewing machine that could sew by turning a crank. Some years he had individual gifts for each student.

At the end of the school year in June, Mr. Barnes hosted a school outing at his cottage. (Page 25) On the cottage grounds was a miniature village complete with church, houses and a garage for toy trucks and cars. This was where the youngest kids entertained themselves. For older students there were bag, three legged, and wheelbarrow races. Refreshments were served and pictures taken. This was a great way to end the school year and start summer vacation.

Vacation time was fun unlike anything today. Kids of all ages were free to roam the woods and swim the brooks and river with little fear of danger or of being kidnaped or raped. No one even knew what the words meant. There weren't any leash laws, so the dogs were free to follow the kids and fought and played with the neighbor dog. Cats stayed home to handle the mice. Boys had baseball bats and some had gloves and shoe skates. The game of peggie was fast fading, and by 1940 it was just a memory. Girls had Shirley Temple dolls and a carriage to go with her. Marbles gave way to alleys and were played for keeps. Baseball cards came with chewing gum and Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and Dizzy Dean were common. If a boy had a paper route, he could own a bicycle, and his travels were unlimited. By the end of the decade, many mothers worked and most boys and some girls had bikes. For ten cents kids could go to the Strand. There they could see Tom Mix, Hop-a-long Cassidy, Roy Rogers, and a serial with Rin-Tin-Tin. The Fourth of July wasn't known for cookouts but for firecrackers and more fun, but we have to get back to Mrs. Gay and her Dennison School.

Mrs. Gay's wages were now \$1,450.00 per year, and besides being a teacher, she was School Principal. She was also custodian for which she made \$6.00 per week. This was for sweeping the floor, spring cleaning, tending the fire, including weekends when she had to bank the coal fire. She also had to wash the blackboards, dust, clean, and disinfect the toilets and anything else to keep the school in good shape. She was also first aid nurse, counselor for when little kids thought they weren't getting a fair shake from older

students, a referee when things got out of hand on the playground, and also supervisor of maintenance. She kept this to an all time low cost due to many friends, student parents and her husband. When a grate broke in the stove, Mr. Henry Walker the neighbor next door, replaced it. Eugene and Raymond Mathieu's father fixed the hinges on the organ cover that were broken. Still another time when one of the ropes on the swing wore through, Marian Gibb volunteered the services of her good natured father. She said, "He was a Navy veteran of WW I and knew the ropes". Sure enough he showed up one noon hour with rope and braided it together while everybody watched. It seemed every one in the School District wanted to help Mrs. Gay keep the school in good working order.

When Mrs. Gay married in 1915, her husband, Walter had a Model T Ford and she learned to drive. In 1927 she bought a Chevrolet Coach for herself and her families use. Her husband then bought a Model T Ford Pick-Up Truck. Could this be the beginning of the first modern day two car family? In 1933, Mrs. Gay surprised her students when she came to school driving a brand new Chevrolet four door Sedan. It was big, blue and shiny, and the kids were as excited about it as she was.

The students also played a part in caring for the school. On a rotational basis, students were assigned tasks according to their ability. A younger child would not be asked to climb a step ladder to put up the swings, or take them down, but he could clap the blackboard erasers. Other duties were raising and lowering the flag, locking and unlocking the toilets, erasing blackboards and cleaning the windows at the end of the school day. When the big wood box was empty each boy had to bring in one armload of wood.

Every once in a while on a windy day, the flag pole rope would work loose and blow on to the school roof. Did Mrs. Gay call the highway department to send a bucket truck to retrieve the rope? Heck no, the students knew how to handle this. A couple of the tallest students would stand on the stonewall behind the school and boost Roland Rondeau onto the roof to bring the rope down. Roland was one of the daring Huckleberry Finn type of kids at the school. Roland Servant was another Huck Finn kid. He was the first to swim in the School Brook (Hatchet Brook on the Dennison Crossroads) as early as March on a warm spring day. These kids could climb the tallest trees and swing down on a grapevine and be the first ones on the ice in late fall. Roland Rondeau still lives in the same house on 42 Breakneck Road with his wife Mary (Osimo) and they operate a beauty salon from their home. This house was once owned by Samuel Cutting who operated the store in Westville

in the 1800s. Unfortunately, Roland Servant was killed at Anzio Beach in Italy during World War I. His brothers, Clovis, Leon, Normand, Albert, Gerard and Roger all came home from the War, safely. Roland had an older sister, Jeanette and brother, Raymond (Pete). All of the nine of the Servant children attended Dennison school. Of course during the War, big sister Jeanette, by her many letters, kept all of the brothers informed of doings on the home front.

During the war years, many students corresponded with Mrs. Gay and if she didn't hear from them, she would get their address from their parents and write to them. The many pictures she received from them were kept in a special album. A letter from her was a real morale booster while serving their country a long way from home.

The Federal Government encouraged scrap metal drives throughout the country, and the kids from Westville, too young to serve in the military or work in factories for the war effort, did their part. They went from door to door collecting old flat irons, pots and pans, and things as small as door keys. One family donated an old car which was too heavy to push. This writer's brother, Paul, age 15 had a homemade truck made from a Model T Ford and he attempted to tow it with little success. A bunch of kids were rounded up and with Paul and the Model T pulling and the kids pushing they managed to get the old car to the scrap pile near the bridge in Westville. The pile was at least 8 feet high and weighed about 6 tons with the old car.

Paul later joined the Navy and served with a Sea Bee Construction Battalion on Okinawa. His brother, Vincent, was also there with the Army Military Police. His brother, Lawrence, inherited the Model T and drove it in a hastily organized parade in Southbridge on VE Day (Victory in Europe). (Page 35) Lawrence became of age to join the Army after Victory in Japan. His brother, Peter, served in the Philippine's with an Anti-aircraft Battalion in the Army. This writer, John, served in the Combat Engineers in Europe.

Sister Helen Boniface Kaitbinski worked at Hamilton Standard Propeller Co. in Hartford, CT for the war effort and volunteered to sell U.S. War Bonds to co-workers to help finance the War. Sister Anna Boniface Poulin, still in school, worked on the scrap drives and had the job of writing letters to all of her brothers. When she didn't get her homework done, she told the teacher, "My mother made me write to my brothers". Before she started high school, her oldest brother Peter wrote to all the brothers asking them to

send a contribution to Helen so she could buy a watch as a gift for Anna when she started her freshman year in high school. Anna received the watch and then more letters were written and received.

The matriarch, Mary Boniface, of this family should not be mistakenly identified as the "lady with the strap", as the story was a composite of events that did happen in the woodpile days and it did happen to others years earlier.

After her family grew up and left home, she thought it was time to get rid of the old player piano that had entertained the family and friends for years. She used the very same axe that Lawrence had used to accidentally cut his sister, Anna's, finger 25 years earlier and chopped the piano into little pieces and carried them out to the wood shed that was no longer used for firewood. This is the same woodshed where her 5 sons started Boniface Tool & Die Company in 1957. Today these pianos are much sought after but when Ma Boniface did her spring-cleaning, there was no stopping her.

Mrs. Gay was invited to the many family gatherings as the men came home. Her son, Walter (Irving), served in the Merchant Marines and her Son-in-law, Lawrence Hutchinson, served in the Navy in the Philippines.

With three new schools in Southbridge, Dennison and all other one room schools in town closed at the end of the school year in June 1936. (Page 34) From then on, students were bussed to the new schools. Everything was new, with electricity, flush toilets, drinking fountains, new desks, and books. They didn't have to walk and there were new friends, but it wasn't the same. At Dennison School, brothers, sisters, and neighbors were all together in the same rooms. Now during Christmas plays, all the actors and actresses were the same age, and the audience members were all strangers. Mothers and Fathers could only attend one play if they had a large family. Quite often a student didn't know anyone. If they did exchange gifts there wasn't a Santa for a second gift. Most of the other students in class came from larger schools such as Marcy Street, Elm Street or School Street Schools, and they never had the good experience of attending a one-room school, especially with a good teacher like Mrs. Gay.

Mrs. Gay tried teaching in one of these new schools but she didn't find the warmth and the sense of belonging as she had at Dennison. She started teaching when she was still a teenager and matured with the life and times of the era.

During that time, many of her former students married and she was teaching their children. Joan Laliberte, Frank and Robert Northrop are three of the students who were in Dennison's last class of 1936 and who had parents in Mrs. Gay's first class of 1907. These kids were like her own grandchildren, and their parents often visited the school.

More things came into the American way of life while she taught at Dennison than before or since that time. With electricity there was radio for entertainment and the latest news as it happened. Gone were the scrub boards for washing clothes and the flat iron that had to be heated on the wood stove on a hot summer day, as well cooking meals on the same hot wood stove. (Page 40)

At the flip of a switch there was good light as opposed to cleaning the lamp chimney, then filling it with oil and lighting it with a match. (Page 40) A power failure today gives one a good idea of what life was like without electricity.

Charles Anger's Blacksmith shop in Westville, closed and Barr and Campbell Brass Foundry took its place. (Page 42)

In 1934 Conrad & Olivette Bouchard were the last students to be transported by horse and buggy (Page 40) to school in the Southbridge school system. They lived on Eastford Road near the Connecticut state line and were the last of eleven children in the Bouchard family to attend Dennison School.

The airplane was just starting to be used for public transportation and busses and taxis were used to bring travelers from the end of the railroad or trolley line to their very door. Automobiles and trucks took the places of the horse drawn buggies and lumber wagons. While the big western farmers were using tractors, horses were still used on the farms of Louis and Joseph Pontbriand, Arthur Martin and Joe Lemoine. The Lemoine's were a family of nine and seven attended Dennison School.

While it was a sad day for the students and teachers alike to see the passing of the one room school, it was all for the better; just like the passing of the horse and buggy and the coming of the automobile.

Our great nation was built by our forefathers who received their primary education in one room schools and they had the foresight to pass a law that all children attend school to learn to read and write. Today we have beautiful, large schools with teachers that specialize in all types of education. They have libraries for research and many other things to educate and motivate students. There are all types of sports and extra-curricular activities that makes the schools a happy place to learn and develop their skills. All of this didn't happen overnight but evolved from the one room school and Mrs. Gay was a big part of it all.