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A Boyhood in Simsbury Memoirs of Joseph Toy Curtiss, Part II

In 1911 the Joseph Toy Curtiss family moved from the Weatogue district to the center of Simsbury. The next couple of years must have been difficult ones. The father, Joseph Toy Curtiss Sr., died in 1912 in a car crash, and the family moved several times before settling down. Still, Joseph Toy Curtiss Jr. seemed to remember these years fondly. There were more friends nearby, more social variety, and more activities, such as the Chautauqua events, that seemed to suit his interests. Part II of his memoir takes him to 1916 and the end of his childhood days in Simsbury.

Part II

In the autumn of 1911 my parents left the house in Weatogue and moved to Simsbury, where we lived very briefly in two different rented houses. In the spring of 1912 my father died in an automobile accident,⁸ and subsequently my mother built the house at the north end of Hopmeadow Street opposite the house of my grandfather, C. Edson Curtiss, whose home in those days was called Seven Elms.* For many years it has been the parish house of the Catholic Church.⁹ Ultimately my mother's house became the property of the Floyd Hamiltons. Then in the summer of 1914 my grandmother left Weatogue and rented the Watson Wilcox house from her brother-in-law – Ralph H. Ensign. This, as you all know, is now the Vincent Funeral Home. Being a woman who knew her own mind, she moved my mother and her children into the Wilcox house with her.

From 1911 on Hopmeadow was the center of all my activities.

I wish I could see again Hopmeadow Street as it was, just to assure myself that it was as beautiful as I remember it. The street did not have as many fine eighteenth century houses as did Litchfield or Farmington. In the 18th century Simsbury was not as wealthy. But in the second half of the 19th century it became a very well-to-do community indeed, partially from its own resources, partially from wealth possessed by descendants of Simsbury families who found the town an ideal summer home. In Weatogue, for example, there were the Dodges, on Hopmeadow Street Mrs. Wood and Robbins family.⁺ In this period some old houses disappeared and large, commodious Victorian residences went up. What I remember most about Hopmeadow Street was its spacious dignity – from the white church on its hill to the McLean Seminary at the opposite end. Straight as an arrow and about a mile in length, it was lined with massive elms and lofty sycamore or button ball trees, only a few of which remain. The street was a cathedral aisle of leafy foliage, for the trees were so huge that their branches met overhead.

It was largely residential except for a block in the center. The library was on one side of the cemetery, on the other the Maple Tree Inn, which occupied all the land from the cemetery to the Methodist church. Opposite the library was Wilcox's General Store, now Pattison's.* There was a drug store, a post office in the same building, a barber shop, a hardware and bicycle shop belonging to old Mr. Welden, a livery stable, and a fruit and vegetable store owned by Mr. Barbieri, a fat, genial, moustached South Italian, whom I always

*The elegant house that Mrs. Curtiss built is the first building west of Hopmeadow Street on the north side of Massaco Street, which was called McLean Avenue at the time. Despite facing Massaco Street, the postal address of the building, which now houses several offices, is 945 Hopmeadow Street.

⁺Mrs. Wood was Antoinette Eno Wood; her summer residence was what is now the Simsbury 1820 House at 731 Hopmeadow Street. The Robbins family occupied the home that later became the Community Club. The lot is now Schultz Park.

associated with his large bunches of red bananas. Mr. Barbieri died suddenly of sunstroke one hot day.

In contrast to my life in Weatogue, in Simsbury my circle of friends and companions was ample. Since by this time we were all possessors of bicycles, the area we covered was almost co-extensive with the town itself. One sport of which we were all inordinately fond was the paper chase or the game of hare and hounds. A couple of boys would be hares. They carried a large bag of paper cut up into small squares. The hares would be given a five or ten minute head start. Honor required that they leave a reasonable, but not too easy, trail of paper. At the appointed time the hounds burst forth in pursuit. The trail usually led up the mountain, in and around the pinnacle, and back



In this photo, the building housing the drugstore and post office is on the left, Barbieri's is in the center and Welden's store is on the right.

by another route. It always covered miles, and the chase would take up the major portion of a Saturday morning. The object was, of course, to overtake the hares before they got back to base.

Our summer sport was swimming. The place which all the children from the north end used was in the Farmington River on Harry Eno's property. A road led down through the old Aaron Eno farm across the railroad tracks through the meadows to a point on the river just south of the bend called Nigger's Elbow.⁺ There was a fine sandbar there with clean, yellow sand which stretched out into the river. The river itself ran clear and limpid.

One stunt we loved. We would pick up a heavy stone to be used as ballast, and with this tightly hugged in our arms, we would walk across the river under water. To hold one's breath long enough to reach the other side was a source of intense pride. It was an unwritten law that in the morning no girls were allowed to swim. In the afternoon we wore bathing suits, but in the morning we ran around, in and out of the river, and around in the meadows, as naked as God made us. I had a dog named Caesar, and together we often spent the major portion of a summer's day in the river and on its bank.

It would be tedious to compile a roll call of my playmates then, much as I might like to do so. Like a catalogue of the ships in the Iliad, it could prove wearisome. But where are they today? Some died years ago, like Allan McLean.^{*} Others like my cousin Chauncey Eno, who lived for years in Indianapolis, found, as I did, their life work elsewhere. Others I have not heard of for years. Where, for example, is John Bridge, the son of Doctor Bridge who taught Greek at Westminster but lived in the village?

But my closest friend, however, was John Ellsworth.⁺ He was three years younger than I. Admittedly, except where books and school were concerned, I was somewhat immature for my age, and John perhaps the opposite. In any event, the discrepancy in our ages meant little. We were almost constant companions except

^{*}The sprawling general store on Wilcox Street eventually became Fiddler's Green.

⁺Regarding this term, please see the footnote on page three of the previous issue of the *Simsbury Free Library Quarterly*.

when some clash of wills produced a temporary but violent flare-up of temper.

I can think of few activities we did not share, including stamp collecting and painting lessons. John and I painted, more energetically than competently. We favored pastels, because the lines could be more easily rubbed out and corrected. Once we decided to have an exhibition of our works. At that time Uncle Ralph Ensign, who was nearing his eightieth year, was having his portrait painted by a well-known portrait painter – Irving Wiles. We invited the entire town, including Mr. Wiles, to attend the exhibition. The entrance fee was two cents for all except Mr. Wiles. I don't think we had the audacity to demand this from him.

Across the street from the Ellsworth house, where the exhibition was held, was the summer home of Mrs. Antoinette Eno Wood. Every Fourth of July she held a garden party for the entire town. There was a band concert, and free ice cream for everyone.

Mrs. Wood, at least to children, seemed a rather formidable person. When in residence she always came to church on Sunday – this was the Congregational church. In those days the pews in the center aisle were all rented, and largely obtainable only by inheritance. Mrs. Wood possessed the front pew on the right. The next three or four behind her were owned by people who had either died or had given up on going to church. They were always vacant. So Mrs. Wood and her guests sat in the front row, separated from ordinary mortals by a wasteland of empty pews. In our eyes this set her apart from, and far above, all ordinary villagers. She wore, like the late Queen Mary, the most extraordinary hats, massive and monumental, and purple seemed to be her favorite color. She was, moreover, a stickler for etiquette. My mother told me this anecdote about her which dates from the early twenties. She lived in Washington, where her social position was somewhat more than secure. She had known every President from Garfield to Harding. Every year she gave a reception. At one of these receptions she spotted a young lady who was openly rouging her lips from a vanity case. Mrs. Wood moved in upon her like one of Her Majesty's ships of the line with the remark, "My dear, if you do not know where the ladies' dressing room is, I will take you there." Incidentally, my mother thoroughly approved of this attitude.

She was also a little peremptory and quick of temper. She was an ardent supporter of woman's suffrage, whereas my mother was an equally ardent anti. One day in Hartford, as my mother and I were walking down Hartford Main Street, she stopped to talk with Mrs. Wood, who was sitting in her large and elegant automobile at the curb. In the conversation woman's suffrage came up. Apparently my mother dared to express her own opinion quite clearly, for I remember that Mrs. Wood leaned forward and tapped her chauffeur on the shoulder with her parasol. "Drive on, Emory" she said. "Drive on at once. I won't talk to her another moment." Open-mouthed, I rather expected the heavens to fall. But as I found out later, when I was in college, she was a very generous and hospitable person, as her Fourth of July parties ought to have taught us. She was devoted to her family and relatives and the Eno



Antoinette Eno Wood
(Mrs. Charles Boughton Wood)

* Allen C. McLean, son of the educator John Bunyan McLean, died in 1944.

† John E. Ellsworth, the instigator of Curtiss's memoir, was the son of Henry E. Ellsworth and grandson of Lemuel S. Ellsworth. Like his sires, he eventually came to run the Ensign-Bickford Company. Ellsworth was an avid and active local historian and published a history of his company and also a history of Simsbury. In 1919 John E. Ellsworth became Curtiss's step-brother when the divorced Henry E. Ellsworth married the widowed Abigail E. Curtiss.

Memorial is proof enough of her devotion to the town.

Fourth of July was indeed glorious then. The pernicious doctrine of a safe and sane Fourth was unheard of. But next to the Fourth of July, Hallowe'en was probably the most fun. It too was not entirely safe or sane.

In the autumn of 1913 the Watson Wilcox house was empty and uninhabited, Miss Adie Wilcox having recently died. She had been a recluse for years. According to my mother, in her younger days she had fallen in love in Paris with a man who in the eyes of her parents was quite unsuitable. She was brought home almost forcibly, and subsequently took it out on her parents by becoming an invalid. She suffered from what the 18th century writers would have called the vapors. To remind her of the Europe from which she had been so untimely snatched, extensive renovations were made which added the tall white portico in front, the music room to the north, and the Italianate pergola to the south. Even in my time there were the remnants of a formal garden stretching out from the pergola. After the steady hand of her parents had been removed, her "invalidism" grew worse, and she became a complete recluse. My grandfather Eno, who was in some way a cousin of hers, had to see her occasionally about financial matters. Miss Adie, however, had foresworn even the sight of men and would converse with my grandfather only through closed and barred doors. Conversation was difficult and my mother said that one could hear the bellowings of my grandfather: "God damn it, Adie, I can't hear you!"

On Hallowe'en eve of 1913 John Ellsworth and I decided that we would terrorize the neighborhood.



Addie Wilcox and her white-pillared mansion.



The obvious place from which to operate was the Wilcox house. Shrouded in sheets, we crouched in the shrubbery. When someone passed by, we undulated and moaned pitifully. As a device for terrorizing the neighborhood it proved ineffective, and after a short time the pastime palled. Then the question came up: Who had the courage to creep up and touch one of the white pillars? It was a crisp moonlit night, but full of dark shadows from the dense shrubbery. Just as we reached the house, the scraping of some dry limb against another produced a sound which sent us fleeing pell mell. I was twelve and John was nine. The only people we terrorized that night were ourselves.

By next Hallowe'en I was living in the Wilcox house.

On one occasion, however, we most successfully terrorized someone, but quite unwittingly. One Hallowe'en the Darlings gave a small children's party. We were all dressed up like goblins and witches. At the end of the party, for some reason quite forgotten, we were taken in a car over to the home of Mrs. Emmett Schulz – Cousin Nan or Aunt Nan as she was to all of us. She was a great favorite with everyone. We rang the doorbell, which was opened by a new maid, a Polish girl, scarcely two months in this country. Heaven knows what visions of progroms [*sic*] and Russian Cossacks or what superstitious memories the sight of us aroused in her as we attempted to crowd in at the door. She made a gurgling sound and keeled over completely. When she recovered, she had hysterics. The doctor was called. The party was over. But for once, no one

blamed me for having thought it up.

I cannot leave the Wilcox house without some kind of tribute to it. The happiest days of my boyhood were spent there. The house was home to me from my thirteenth year to my seventeenth. The family circle was the center of our activities. I was a great reader, and my grandfather had a good library. With him I played endless games of cards, particularly cribbage. From my mother I learned how to play chess. At table we discussed politics and current events. I was encouraged to have an opinion, and it was listened to. I was also expected to tell about the interesting things which had happened to me in school or during the day. No question of mine would ever go unanswered. It was assumed that children wanted to learn, and that not the least part of education began at home.

Speaking of education, I cannot begin to describe the excitement when Chautauqua first came to Simsbury. It was in the summer of 1915. Chautauqua in New York was, and is, a well known educational and cultural resort. But for a brief number of years, a system was devised by which the educational and cultural advantages of Chautauqua fanned out over the country. A large circus tent was set up, which certainly seated well over a thousand. For a week every form of cultural entertainment was provided. Remember that in Simsbury we had no movies. Radio and television did not exist. There was only the phonograph with its limited supply of records. Under that Chautauqua tent even the sermons were thrilling. There I heard my first Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, my first concert orchestra, my first chamber music, and even saw my first magician. There were lectures on all manner of subjects, there were humorists, acrobats, and glee clubs. Performances were held every afternoon and evening, and there were special entertainments for children in the morning. It was a week when the cornucopia of the world's riches was opened and poured into our laps.

Thus the years passed, and in the fall of 1916 I went away to school. My boyhood was behind me, and the slow gradual process of drawing away from Simsbury had begun. It was the horse and buggy era, but it was a good time to live. In retrospect I think one can say that ours was the last generation which could read Tom Sawyer and find nearly everything in it germane to our own experiences. The cast of characters might be different, but the stage setting was the same.

I hope that I have been able to give you some impression of what one boy's life was like. In closing I can only say that I have enjoyed calling back to mind these years. Perhaps the familiar line from the Aeneid best expresses my feeling.

Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit. "And perhaps someday it will be pleasing to remember these things."



Alan Lahue contributed the introductions and notations for this memoir written during the celebration of Simsbury's 1970 Tercentenary by Joseph Toy Curtiss. Please see additional notes on page six.

Donations to the Simsbury Free Library

The Simsbury Free Library's collection continues to grow, thanks to all those who contribute books and research materials. Heartfelt thanks from everyone at the library to:

Judith King for *The Mayflower Quarterly*, Diamond Jubilee Edition (2012) and *The Mayflower Journal*, volume 1, issue 1 (2016), both published by the General Society of Mayflower Descendants.

Marian Ricker for the four-volume work *Historic Homes and Places and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, William Richard Cutter, editor, published by the Lewis Historical Publishing Company in 1908.

Frank Zaremba for the *Hale Collection Non-Sectarian Tariffville Cemetery Records*. This data on the library's computer can be accessed by last name, first name and date.

Richard Converse for the booklet *Alonzo G. Case, His Civil War Experience, Told in His Own Words*. Alonzo Grove Case (1834-1902) was a native of Simsbury.

Notes

8. Joseph T. Curtiss Sr. was killed near New Haven on March 19, 1912, when his car overturned. See "Joseph T. Curtiss Killed by Auto," *Hartford Courant*, March 20, 1912.

9. The Catholic Church purchased the property that included Seven Elms in 1920. It first served as the priest's residence. By the time St. Mary's School opened in 1957, the house was converted to a residence for the Sisters of the Felician Order, who served as teachers at the school. At their departure 25 years later, the building became empty and was demolished in 1982. The current Parish Center was built in its place in 1985. From "History of St. Mary's Church" by Katherine E. Bombara (1987), unpublished manuscript in the archives of the Simsbury Historical Society.

10. Adelaide "Adie" Eno Wilcox died on August 10, 1914. See "Adelaide E. Wilcox Dies In Simsbury," *Hartford Courant*, August 10, 1914. In October it was reported that Ralph Hart Ensign had purchased the property. See "Ensign Buys Wilcox Property," *Hartford Courant*, October 18, 1914.

11. The first Chautauqua event in Simsbury ran from Thursday, July 30 – Wednesday, August 5, 1914. See "Program for The Chautauqua," *Hartford Courant*, June 28, 1914. A large tent, capable of seating between 1,000 and 2,000 people, was set up just north of the high school (the building that now serves as the town office building). As it happened, this was just across the street from Curtiss's home. See "Simsbury To Have Chautauqua Week," *Hartford Courant*, June 27, 1915. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan was scheduled to speak, but was unable to keep his commitment. War was breaking out in Europe in August 1914 and Secretary Bryan's services were needed in Washington, D.C. See "Bryan Did Not Come," *Farmington Valley Herald*, August 7, 1914.

12. Curtiss attended The Hotchkiss School and Yale University (Class of 1923). He subsequently obtained his graduate degree and taught in Yale's English Department until his retirement in 1966. During the Second World War his academic career took an unexpected turn when he found himself performing intelligence-gathering duties in Turkey for the Office of Strategic Services. For a detailed narrative of his experiences as a spy, see *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939 – 1961* by Robin W. Winks (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), especially chapter 3.

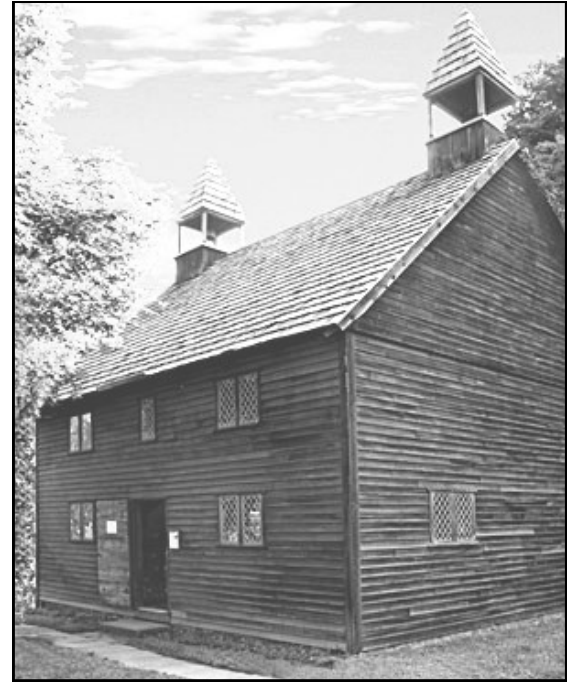
All the photographs used in this issue are courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society.

Simsbury's Tercentenary Celebration

Part 2

The article about Simsbury's Tercentenary Celebration in 1970 that appeared in the previous issue told of the major events held in town. There was a beard-growing contest, a house tour and flower show, a parade down Hopmeadow and West Streets that drew about 30,000 spectators, a ball in the pavilion of the former Rosewood Restaurant that drew almost 1,000 and other events. The Civitan Club's Massaco Indian Village was a long term installation. Here is an account of two works that originated during the celebration which are still with us today.

The brown wooden meeting house reproduction facing Hopmeadow Street at the northwest corner of the Simsbury Historical Society's property was built as the headquarters for the Tercentenary Committee. The townspeople of Simsbury had erected their first meeting house in 1683 near the present gate of Simsbury Cemetery and used it for town meetings and other events and for Congregational Church services until they completed a larger building in 1743 on Drake Hill.



Meeting House Reproduction

During the celebration of Connecticut's Tercentenary in 1935, the people of Simsbury went

to the site of the first meeting house and erected another using the explicit specifications given the original builder, Thomas Barber, and their knowledge of 17th century English buildings. After the 1935 celebration this reproduction was dismantled, but the door and several windows were reused in 1970. By this time, the historical society had been given the 1771 Phelps House and property by Mary Phelps Ensign Lovejoy, so this meeting house replica had a permanent home. It is frequently used for activities today.



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The 1935 Connecticut celebration inspired John E. Ellsworth to follow in the footsteps of Simsbury historians Noah A. Phelps (1788-1872) and Lucius I. Barber (1806-1889) to write the third comprehensive history of the town. He wrote *Simsbury: Being a Brief Historical Sketch of Ancient and Modern Simsbury, 1642-1935*. Thirty-five years later, thinking that it was time for another update, the Simsbury Tercentenary Committee, with John Ellsworth at its head, commissioned William M. Vibert, a history teacher at the Westledge School, to write a fourth history. His book, *Three Centuries of Simsbury: 1670-1970*, remains a valuable source of information about the town's past.

Request for Information

John Sandoval is researching the history of his house at 1001 Hopmeadow Street. James E. Hamilton lived there until 1916 when he sold to William and Grace (Curtiss) Lamb. An auction of furnishings from the house was held at that time. Please contact the library if you have any information to share with Mr. Sandoval about the house, furnishings or early residents.

Upcoming Programs at the Simsbury Free Library

A Wine & Cheese Reception for Bibi Gaston

Please join us for an hour at the library on Tuesday, June 27, at 5:30 p.m.
for a reception prior to Bibi Gaston's talk at the Simsbury Public Library on her new book

Gifford Pinchot and the First Foresters:

The Untold Story of the Brave Men and Women

Who Launched the American Conservation Movement.

Bibi Gaston chronicles the early days of the American conservation movement while suggesting a service-based approach to environmental issues similar to the one that was created a century ago when her great-granduncle, Gifford Pinchot, was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to run the newly created U.S. Forest Service. Books will be available for \$22.95 and the author will sign them following the talk.

Reservations are strongly suggested for the reception at our library and the 7:00 p.m. talk at the public library.

Call us at 860-408-1336 or email at simsburyfreelibrary@gmail.com

or contact the Simsbury Public Library at 860-658-7663 or www.simsburylibrary.info.

Drop-In Book Club—all are welcome

July 18—11:15 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.—Field trip to the Hillstead Museum. Call or email for information.

Drop-In Genealogy—Thursdays from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

June 15, 22, 29; July 6, 13, 20, 27; August 3, 10, 17.

Marilyn Giese will be on hand to help you research your family.

The Library will be CLOSED on Tuesday, July 4

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Mary Jane Springman, Editor, SFL Quarterly

