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

In 1970, Simsbury observed its three-hundredth birthday with a series of parades, plays, speeches and concerts. The schools held special assemblies commemorating the past and men sprouted long whiskers as they competed in a beard-growing contest. It was a town-wide affair spanning many months, and it seemed nearly everyone had a role to play.

John E. Ellsworth, chairman of the committee organizing the celebrations, asked his boyhood friend Joseph Toy Curtiss for a literary contribution. While Joseph Curtiss was not a resident of Simsbury at the time of the anniversary celebrations - he had retired a few years earlier from a distinguished career on the faculty of the Yale University English department - he was descended from several of the town's prominent families (Curtiss, Toy, Eno) and spent his boyhood years growing up in homes in the Weatogue section of town and in the center of Simsbury. He agreed to compose a brief essay about his boyhood in Simsbury.

What followed was a two-part memoir covering the period from about 1908 to 1916. Part I concerned mostly the years 1908 - 1911 when the Curtiss family lived in Weatogue; Part II the period from 1911 - 1916, when the family moved to the north end of Hopmeadow Street in Simsbury. The narrative concluded as young Joseph was preparing to go off to school.

Curtiss said that he wanted to depict, as well as he could, "what it felt like to be a boy in Simsbury in those years, and in some sense, perhaps, to ask what content of meaning such a boyhood might have for us today." It was not a history but a personal, subjective look back, and it gives us today a glimpse of life in the town a hundred years ago, just as the turmoil of the 20th century was beginning to work its changes.

Curtiss's memoir was apparently presented at a meeting of the Simsbury Historical Society on May 19, 1970. His text, which follows, is published verbatim. Spellings and punctuation are from the original. Readers are advised that the memoir contains a phrase that many will find offensive. They should; but the fact that residents of Simsbury once did not find it so may be taken as a telling measure of the historical distance we have traveled in the last half century. Footnotes are added from time to time to add context and additional details about persons and events.

Part I

I need not say that it is a pleasure to return to Simsbury on the occasion of this Tercentenary and to recall briefly my own boyhood here. My ties with Simsbury have been lasting and deep, as they still are.

Some time ago Mr. John Ellsworth suggested that I write up my recollections of Simsbury as it used to be. This seemed to me too formidable a task, and I demurred. But a reasonable compromise seemed to be a brief essay, somewhat more subjective in nature.

I have called this paper a "Boyhood in Simsbury" because I want it clearly understood that these are the personal recollections of just one boy. I am not here as an historian, nor will this in any sense be a history of Simsbury in the period immediately before the First World War. I can think of numerous people in this town who are far better qualified than I to describe objectively the Simsbury of those days. This can be no

more than a partial view of the past. But what I would like to do is to picture, as well as I can, what it felt like to be a boy in Simsbury in those years, and in some sense, perhaps, to ask what content of meaning such a boyhood might have for us today.

My first coherent recollections begin in 1908 in Weatogue. We were living, my father, mother, and a baby brother, in what was then called the Bigelow house.¹ Next to us lived my paternal grandparents – Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Ensign, in what afterward became the Montgomery place. Charles Ensign was, of course, a step-grandfather.*

Simsbury was then a self-contained rural community, perhaps in many ways an ideal projection of the type. It was, in so far as any community can be, sufficient unto

itself. I cannot remember anyone who went to Hartford to earn his living. Agriculture was still a dominant feature of the landscape, if not of the economy. The tobacco fields stretched irregularly to the north and south, most of them growing Connecticut broad-leaf, for the big shift to shade-grown tobacco was yet to come.² Nearly every farmer, and Simsbury had many, raised a substantial amount of tobacco, perhaps five to fifteen acres. A few raised more.

These farms were not specialized. Each farmer raised a little of everything, but tobacco was his money-making crop. Next to tobacco as a source of income came milk. Every farmer had a herd of dairy cows, as did many who were not primarily farmers. Even on Hopmeadow Street one could see the cows belonging to R. H. Ensign being driven back and forth to pasture. There were, in fact, two working farms on Hopmeadow Street, those belonging to Judge Phelps and Mr. George Eno. The lower slopes of the mountain to the east, where now there are only woods and houses, were largely open fields used for summer pasturage. Simsbury had its own creamery, and butter did not come packaged from Wisconsin. In fact, nearly everyone had a cow. My grandmother Ensign in Weatogue had a cow, which provided milk and cream for her household. One of my earliest recollections is of the trays of milk set out in her pantry for the cream to rise. This was skimmed off by hand, yellow, thick and rich. What happened to my grandmother's skim milk I do not know, but I am certain no one drank it.

My closest association with a farm, however, was with that of my maternal grandfather – Chauncey Eno – in Hoskins Station.⁺ This farm had been in the hands of the senior branch of the Eno family since the mid-eighteenth century. It was a large farm, as farms went, even though a fair sized piece had been lopped off about the time I was born. My father – Joseph Toy Curtiss – had been sent as a boy to Mr. Cushing's school – Westminster – which was then in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Afterwards he was instrumental in persuading Mr. Cushing to move his school to Simsbury, and much of the land on which Westminster now stands was bought



Photo Courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society

The Bigelow house, where the Curtiss family lived in Weatogue, is on the left. It still stands at 327 Hopmeadow Street.

*Joseph Toy Curtiss's parents were Joseph Toy Curtiss Sr. and Abigail Eno Curtiss. His paternal grandparents were Sarah Toy Curtiss and Charles Edson Curtiss. In 1890 Sarah and Charles were divorced and she married Charles A. Ensign, an architect.

⁺Chauncey Hart Eno's farmhouse stands in the northern part of Simsbury at 12 Eno Place.

from my grandfather.* I might add that my mother – Abigail Goodrich Eno – was the youngest child in the Chauncey Eno family. She married my father in 1899.

The Eno farm, as I said, was still a good-sized farm, and to a small boy it seemed enormous. On Sundays we often drove up from Weatogue to spend the day with my grandparents, and as a small boy I roamed the fields and woods with my cousin Chauncey Eno. We were of practically the same age.

But my happiest recollections of the farm are of playing in the empty tobacco sheds. I wonder if those of you who are not native to Simsbury or some similar town ever played in a tobacco shed? Overhead was a forest of beams and rafters from which the drying leaves would be hung. Chan and I would climb to the highest beams with the agility of monkeys and creep from one to another, with the ground thirty feet below. Tarzan had little on us. As I recall these pastimes, though, I am reminded of the Quaker adage, that every grown man is a monument to the Grace of God.

Today as one drives through Hoskins Station there is little that reminds one of the Eno farm as it once was. In those days the road from Simsbury wound under the railroad tracks at Nigger's Elbow (has that name disappeared with integration?)⁺ and up through the farm itself, past the big house with its numerous barns. The road which you know did not exist until many years later. To the west where a whole development stands today, the tobacco fields stretched out to the edge of the woods and the setting sun. Just a few hundred yards north of the house, the road branched, one branch leading to the bridge over the Farmington River, the other, north, winding past the farms belonging to the Hoskins and St. Johns. In those days there were scarcely ten houses along that entire road, until one came to Granby. To the east, sloping down to the Farmington River, lay the meadows, inhabited largely, or so it seemed, by red-winged blackbirds and snakes.

An ecological mystery which I cannot explain is the relative scarcity of snakes in these modern times. Of course, I say relative, for there are snakes around, but you can have little idea of their abundance then. Where are they today? But for that matter where are the red-winged blackbirds?

In my childhood snakes were everywhere, around the house, around the barns, in and around every brook and pond, in the meadows – all kinds of snakes, little green grass snakes, garter snakes, milk snakes, water snakes, black snakes. Scarcely a summer day could pass without our seeing several. All of them were harmless, but not according to beliefs so carefully instilled in us. Of course, there were rattlesnakes and copperheads in the mountains, but we rarely if ever saw any. Certainly we never killed one, whose corpse could attest to the authenticity of the species. But in the minds of our forebears practically all snakes were deadly. How they could have amassed so much misinformation about a creature with which they were in daily contact I cannot comprehend. I remember that among the most feared was one they called the "flat-headed adder". They probably had in mind the harmless little hog-nosed snake of the genus *Heterodon*, which hisses and then shams dead when frightened. Other snakes, admittedly not too deadly, were accused of curious unsocial habits. Milk snakes, for example, were supposed to loiter around barns in order to steal milk from the cows' udders. I knew farmhands who swore that they had seen this happen – such is the power of imagination. Actually milk snakes ate small mice and were a boon to the farmers. Perhaps our forebears explained the large number of snakes by their charming superstition that a horsehair soaked in water would turn into a snake. There are fewer horses and horsehairs today, which may account for the scarcity of snakes. When I was young, I spent many thwarted hours, soaking horsehairs in glass jars, vainly waiting for a transmogrification.

Another delightful superstition was the belief that if one put salt on a bird's tail, it couldn't fly. I spent

*The Westminster School moved to Simsbury from Dobbs Ferry, New York, in 1900.

⁺The origin of this unfortunate phrase is not known, but the place is clearly marked on at least two maps, one dating from 1917 and one from 1935, so Curtiss's recollection of the name is accurate.

hours tracking down little birds, until my mother admitted that if one could get close enough to a bird to put salt on its tail, one could probably catch it anyway.

But to return to Weatogue in 1908. In the village most of the houses which I knew are still standing. The devastating changes have been to the west, where there were once only scattered houses and a few large estates belonging to the various Dodges. Just on the western edge of Weatogue, standing on a hill, was the summer home of Mrs. Arthur Murray Dodge, justly famous for its rose gardens, which were always on display at an annual "At Home". Farther west in Bushy Hill were the summer homes of the other Dodges, which were, a few years later, to form the nucleus of the Ethel Walker school.³ All the rest was farmland and forest.

In the village of Weatogue proper there were some two dozen homes, a one-roomed school house, a general store which served also as a post office, a blacksmith shop, and little else. There was no overpass over the railroad tracks.* When a train was due, a watchman, an old man with a peg leg, came out with a flag and halted the traffic. The road crossed the tracks close by the Civil War monument. After crossing the tracks one saw on the left the Smith house, then the home of Mr. and Mrs. Croft, and then the building which is now the Pettibone Tavern. Opposite this was our home.

In those days the house across the street was, I think, known as the Wentwood place.⁺ It was closed, shuttered and uninhabited, awaiting its final disposition on the settlement of some estate. It was, however, completely furnished, with the chairs and sofas shrouded in their dust covers. Breaking and entering was a crime, which if detected was followed by swift retribution. But entering without breaking, ah, there was the challenge. I remember that several of us found a cellar window through which we could crawl. Nothing is more calculated to arouse the fertile imagination of a boy than a furnished but uninhabited house. Every darkened room conceals a mystery. One never opened a closet door without the faint hope that there, like one of Bluebeard's wives, might hang the dessicated [*sic*] relic of some undiscovered crime.

Old abandoned houses with peeling plaster and ragged holes in the floor had too their unique charms. But these I would recommend for exploration only in the twilight, or, if one is a little older, on moonlit nights. By daylight such houses are exposed in all their pitiful shabbiness. But in the velvety enveloping darkness of a summer night, these houses come to life, they breathe, strange footsteps follow the intruders as they feel their way from room to room, until overcome by the power of their own imaginations they flee in terror.

Of course, this was all a game; we knew that the ghosts and horrors that we more than half wanted to encounter were no more real than the fairy stories we read. But remember that we had no television and no horror movies. To satisfy a boy's natural instinct to live in a dangerous and thrilling world, we had recourse to naught but our own imaginations. Back then children were expected to amuse themselves. We were certainly never showered with presents, given only to buy our favor or keep us out of our parents' hair.

There were many tramps. Scarcely a day in summer went by without one or more of these derelicts of the road showing up and asking for food and perhaps a little work to pay for it. We were warned never to talk to them and above all never to let one come near us in a lonely place. But just why these tramps were a danger we never quite knew.⁴ Probably our parents had some fear of molestation, but this was something beyond our ken. I think that our very genuine apprehension arose from the fact that tramps usually smelled of liquor, and we were afraid of drunks, wherever we found them. It is probably the irrationality of an intoxicated person that seems frightening to a child, for we were quite as frightened of anyone who was slightly crazy, or seemed to be an out and out eccentric. Such persons were called characters.

*The road was re-designed and an overpass built in 1910.

⁺Curtiss is probably remembering the John Wentworth home. The Wentworths were residents in Weatogue in 1900, but by 1910 had moved to Hartford.

We had one who lived near us. To the south where the road to Avon crossed the railroad tracks stood a large red house of considerable antiquity. This belonged to a man named Walt Tuller. He lived alone, he did not wash, his clothes were shabby, and his domestic habits were akin to those of a tramp. He was, as I remember, wall-eyed, grizzled gray, and he talked to himself. We could not tell when he might turn on us with oaths and threatened violence. On the other hand, I am sure that we plagued him, for he aroused in us the same ambivalent attraction as a haunted house.

Then too there were gypsies. But whereas tramps were omnipresent, gypsies were relatively rare. They often camped on the river bank by the Hoskins Station bridge, just where the road branched south to Terry's Plain. When they were camping there, we might watch them from the opposite bank, which was part of the Eno farm, but under no circumstances were we allowed to cross the bridge, for everyone knew of someone, who knew someone, who actually knew of a child that had been stolen by gypsies.⁵ But in reality this was a very safe and secure world and little threatened the child except that accident which might be caused by his own carelessness. Consequently the admonition to be careful was dinned into our ears. There were a few things we were not allowed to do. Though we might bathe in the Farmington in the summer if some older boy was present, we must never, never skate on it in winter. Because of the currents and thin patches of ice, it was regarded as highly treacherous. But the roads were quite safe. Automobiles in 1908 were curiosities. One might see three or four a day in summer. No one thought of them as a menace to life or limb unless one was in them. In winter the roads were never ploughed, and we could slide down hill wherever we wanted. Strangers except for tramps were never seen. Otherwise a child rarely saw a person whom he did not know or could not place.

Since there were no strangers around, the concept of trespassing did not exist. We roamed where we wanted without let or hindrance. But if we damaged something or acted like little vandals, the culprit was soon discovered, and retribution followed. This was a world which honored the Biblical adage: "Spare the rod and spoil the child." The voice of the modern psychologist was not abroad in the land.

There was just as natural a tendency toward mischief in those days as in any other. Up to a certain point our elders didn't take this too seriously. "Boys will be boys" covered any number of petty trespasses. But the firm hand of discipline was always in the background. My mother's customary punishment consisted of a hairbrush vigorously applied to the bare behind. It stung, but I can assure you, it left no traumatic scars. She had another, which would probably be outlawed by the Supreme Court as "cruel and unusual". For petty trespasses I was made to stand quietly in a corner until I had learned a number of verses from the Bible, the length of which depended upon the gravity of the offense. Though this did not endear the Bible to me, it left me with a lasting appreciation of the beauty of its prose. I remember once I was told to learn a few verses, not necessarily in sequence. One that I chose was the shortest in the Bible: "Jesus wept." Thereafter mother chose the passages, and we concentrated on the psalms.

In our world we knew what we could do, and what we could not do. And even more important – we knew that the consequences of doing what we had been told not to do would be prompt and painful.

All this seems far better to me than the so-called permissiveness of recent years. Any child, today, tomorrow or yesterday, will test the limits of permissiveness to the utmost. Instinct makes him want to know how far he can go, nor will he refrain from finding out.

The rules which we had to follow were not the casual inventions of our parents. They represented the collective experience of generations. They were a way of life. Some may have been trivial, others outmoded, but for us they were the law. They traced out the perimeter of our behavior. Within this we were free to do what we wanted. There was less supervision, less nagging, and also less neglect than I have often observed in these later years.

Furthermore with every privilege went a responsibility. To neglect the responsibility meant the immediate withdrawal of the privilege. In the country in those days boys were early given air-guns and then real rifles, for hunting or for target practice. As a very small child one was never allowed to point a toy gun or pistol at anyone at any time or under any circumstances. If one did, out came the hairbrush and the toy was confiscated. By the age of twelve we could all handle a real gun with the care and respect which is society's only safeguard.

To my mind there is only one danger in the punishment of a child. He must recognize its justice. But justice had nothing to do with the rationality of the rule. The only question was: "Did you willfully break it?"

I remember only one unjust punishment and it rankled for years. Mr. John Bunyan McLean was the superintendent of schools. You will probably remember that he had been the founder and head of the McLean Seminary, a finishing school for girls, which had closed its doors some years before. One day he made one of his regular visitations to the Weatogue school. He found me reading one of Horatio Alger's novels for boys which had been loaned me. Mr. McLean picked it up, read several pages, and then laid it down with the admonition that I shouldn't be reading such trash. Admittedly I shouldn't have been reading it in school. But the book itself was harmless.

Now it happened that John McLean was the brother of Senator George P. McLean and his wife – Juliette Goodrich McLean – was my mother's aunt.* A few days after this incident I was confronted by my mother with an astonishing accusation. She was practically in tears. "Your Aunt Juliette has told me that Mr. McLean found you reading a filthy book in school. What was the book and where did you get it?"

The greatest difference between those days and the present was the readiness of parents then to believe the worst about their offspring. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred they were quite right in so doing. They well knew that even the most angelic exterior housed an unruly demon inside. But by this accusation my unruly demon was merely bewildered, and I protested vigorously that I knew nothing of any filthy books. My protestations were of little avail for a time against such a weight of authority. Ultimately the matter was straightened out, but strangely the person I condemned in my mind was not my mother or even Mr. McLean, but my Aunt Juliette, who seemed to me to have been guilty of inaccurate and ill-considered tale-bearing. Of course, my attitude toward her was as unjust as the accusation itself. She had probably misunderstood what Mr. McLean had told her, and being a woman who was devoted to her own family, she felt that if any great-nephew of hers was reading dirty books, it ought to be nipped in the bud.

But the incident was enlightening. It taught me that there were such things in the world as dirty books, something that I had never suspected at the age of nine.

But to be truthful, I was rarely the injured innocent. In one of my unruliest episodes at school, I learned several salutary lessons. I had been ordered to remain after school for some trivial reason. I wanted to go skating and even had my skates with me. I flatly refused to stay and attempted to storm out the door, even threatening to hit the teacher with my skates. I didn't go skating. Instead I got whipped – whipping consisted of a kind of rubber cat-of-nine-tails applied to the outstretched palm.

The next day my father summoned me – a certain sign that the offense was grievous. His sole remark was: "I hear from your mother that you were whipped at school for rudeness, insubordination, and lack of manners." I then received another whipping, around the ankles, for the immutable rule of life was – whipped at school, whipped at home, probably on the theory that the whipping at school was for what one did there, the whipping at home for the disgrace one had brought upon one's parents.

*George P. McLean was elected to the United States Senate by the state Legislature in January 1911.

As I have said, the firm hand of discipline began and ended at home. In a rural community little could remain hidden, and parents never took the attitude that it was someone else's responsibility to discipline their children.

We needed no police. In all Simsbury there was only one constable. His duties consisted largely of locking up an occasional tramp who had imbibed enough to make him a public nuisance. But in Weatogue I have not the slightest recollection that the upholders of law and order ever impinged on our consciousness. Only on one occasion do I remember their presence. A young mother, clearly in temporary mental distress, drowned herself and her children in the Farmington River.⁶ I do not remember her name or anything about her. She was only loosely connected with Weatogue. I think that the state police were there with us when the bodies were finally dredged from the water, but I am not sure. Such tragedies a community could handle by itself with a constable and a doctor. We were self-sufficient.

Save for this one episode violent death was unknown, and sudden death was rare. There was a hushed sense of tragic forces beyond man's control when Mr. Hale died. He was a good man in the prime of life, who lived a few houses to the south, roughly opposite the Dickinson place. We were told that he came into the house one afternoon with a violent headache. By the next evening he was dead – from meningitis. For a day or two we children talked in subdued tones. We clearly felt as if the wings of the Angel of Death should have rustled audibly for any event so momentous.

But the death of the elderly, whose span of life had seemingly been fulfilled, touched us very little, unless personally involved. Across the road from our house was the home of the Reverend and Mrs. Charles P. Croft. I can scarcely recall Mrs. Croft, except as a vaguely remembered white-haired old lady. I know that she died early in my years in Weatogue, but I cannot say when.* But Mr. Croft I remember well. He was a quiet, gentle and courteous man. Though not noticeably friendly with children, he was always thoughtful and understanding. My own association with him was an annual affair. Standing on his land was a long line of magnificent sugar maples. Now one of the pleasures of boyhood was to collect the sap, and boil it down until one had his own maple syrup. The process was simple. A hole was bored in a tree, a spout inserted, and one was in business. However, it was a standing rule that I might not touch one of these trees without Mr. Croft's express permission. So each year early in March I would appear at his door. I was always received graciously. After some deliberation during which he considered the proposal Mr. Croft would finally say yes. But he would add the admonition that when I had finished gathering the sap, I must be certain, absolutely certain, that the hole in the tree was securely plugged.

In winter we skated whenever possible. Weatogue had no really good ponds, but fortunately the meadows usually flooded in the autumn and large swampy areas were sufficiently like ponds to permit adequate skating. Our favorite spot was on the low ground back of the Smith house. Most of you will



Photo Courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society

Rev. Charles Pitman Croft on his property at 332 Hopmeadow Street where Joseph Toy Curtiss collected maple sap.

*Julia Mather Croft died on May 31, 1911.

remember Lillian Smith with as much warmth and affection as I do.⁷ At this time her father, mother, and aunt – Miss Daisy Winslow – lived in that house. The skating area was known to all, adults as well as children, as Mrs. Smith's Bottom – I presume from some old phrase about bottom lands. But to us children the thought of skating on Mrs. Smith's bottom was a constant source of risibility.

As I have said, we were never neglected but we were never coddled. In winter even with drifts across the road, we were bundled up and shoved out to make our unguarded way to school as best we could. And if we were sick or ailing, out came the pharmacopoeia of household remedies, castor oil, cod-liver oil, milk of magnesia, mustard plasters, and in the spring a tonic known as sulphur and molasses, which led to rather horrible forms of flatulence. But if one were really sick, the doctor was called, and in those days he came, no matter what the weather.

I had few companions of my own age then. My closest friend was a boy some six years older than I – Bill Tuller. His father was Frank Tuller – a carpenter. Their family lived just to the rear of my grandparent's property. In the early spring and autumn Bill and I trapped muskrats along the banks of the Farmington. At least Bill did, and I tagged along. He killed the animals, skinned them, and sold the furs. But here again a firm rule had to be followed. No animal could be left in a trap longer than necessary. Whatever the weather the line of traps had to be inspected daily in the chilly dawn before breakfast and school.

These were my Weatogue days – a little solitary perhaps, for admittedly there were few children to play with, particularly children of people who were friends and acquaintances of my family. Hence the importance of those trips to the Eno farm, where all the Eno grandchildren gathered, Enos, Carvers and ourselves.* Or those family gatherings in Simsbury with my father's relatives, all descendants of Joseph Toy, the Ellsworths, Darlings and Ensigns.⁺ Thanksgiving dinner was always at Aunt Anne Ellsworth's, Christmas at Aunt Sue Ensign's. But perhaps the most memorable of these gatherings were the summer picnics. We all went in automobiles, and by the time that the whole Toy tribe as well as a few of their close friends, like Woods Chandler, were all gathered together, the line of automobiles was a cavalcade. We sped along at twenty miles an hour, punctuated by occasional stops to change a tire. Most of the adults wore linen dusters and goggles. When we arrived at some woodsy glade, by the side of a brook, the hampers were unloaded, the fire lighted, the children ran off to play, and the elders settled down to the Edwardian joys of a bucolic afternoon.

A moment ago I use the word solitary in connection with my Weatogue days. But as I think it over, it is not the correct word, for I was never lonely. There was always the family, including my grandparents next door. During the winter evenings we played games or read. In the winter of 1910-11 I was made to read all by myself all of Dickens' Child's History of England, in preparation for a trip to England with my grandparents in the coming summer. I confess that at the age of nine I did need a bit of prodding. But the alloyed delight of that winter was my mother's reading the whole of Scott's Kenilworth out loud – a chapter a night through a number of weeks.

The next winter she read Ivanhoe to me, but by that time we had already moved to Simsbury.

The second and final part of Joseph Toy Curtiss's memoir of his boyhood will appear in the Spring 2017 issue of the Simsbury Free Library Quarterly.

*Dr. John Preston Carver, a general practitioner and later the medical examiner, married Helen E. Eno (Joseph Curtiss's aunt) and lived at 961 Hopmeadow Street.

⁺Joseph Toy was for many years the managing partner of the firm Toy, Bickford and Company. At his death in 1887 ownership of the company passed to his three sons-in-law, Ralph Hart Ensign, Lemuel S. Ellsworth and Charles Edson Curtiss, and the company was renamed the Ensign-Bickford Company. Robert Darling married Ralph Ensign's youngest daughter, Julia Whiting Ensign.

The Introduction and Notations By Alan Lahue

While volunteering as an archivist for the Simsbury Historical Society, Alan Lahue stumbled across Joseph Toy Curtiss's memoir "A Boyhood in Simsbury" and suggested it for publication. He agreed to write the introduction and to provide the explanatory footnotes and endnotes. His contributions, and the historical society's wisdom in preserving the essay, have made it possible for today's readers to enjoy Mr. Curtiss's reminiscences.

Alan Lahue retired from the insurance industry after a thirty-three year career and now enjoys a little free time to indulge his lifelong interest in history. He is co-author, with Mary Jane Springman, of *Images of America: Simsbury*. The book was published in 2011 by Arcadia Publishing with the proceeds benefiting the Simsbury Historical Society.

Notes

1. At the time that Curtiss lived in the house, it was owned by the Reverend Charles P. Croft. Lucius W. Bigelow, a tin peddler and Civil War veteran, bought the house later, in 1920.

2. The change to shade tobacco would come quickly. Not long after the Curtisses moved northward from the Weatogue section to the center of Simsbury, the *Hartford Courant* reported that the American Sumatra Tobacco Company, a large grower with holdings in the southern end of town, had 100 acres of tobacco "under shade." See "Tobacco Acreage in Simsbury," *Hartford Courant*, June 14, 1914.

3. At the time Curtiss wrote his memoir, none of the Dodge family summer homes were still standing. Two of them that had been on the Ethel Walker School property burned to the ground in 1933 and the third was torn down in 1969. The estate of Mrs. Arthur Murray Dodge on Sand Hill Road is now the site of a condominium complex. See Mary Jane Springman and Alan Lahue, *Images of America: Simsbury* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), 48-50.

4. That tramps were commonly seen is confirmed by reports in the *Hartford Courant*. They seem usually to have been accused of setting fires (often by accident from their campsites in the woods) or of theft. See, for example, "Fires in Simsbury: Woodland is Damaged," *Hartford Courant*, May 6, 1908; "Simsbury: Tramp Camped Out In Holcomb Place," *Hartford Courant*, March 22, 1913.

5. In April 1915 the *Hartford Courant* reported an alarming visit by a gypsy band. One of the group's wagons broke down and while it was being repaired "members of the band went scurrying here and there seeing what they could appropriate." Pickpockets and fortune tellers were everywhere, it seemed. The article mentioned that this band was unlike the usual groups that would occasionally camp in Hoskins Station. Instead, "This band is the kind that one was threatened with in child hood days, that makes everyone, especially children, want to run and hide." See "Band of Gypsies On the Road," *Hartford Courant*, April 25, 1915.

6. Curtiss is probably remembering an incident from March 1909. Mary Simon Miller, 30, wife of Amos Miller, drowned herself and her two small children, Henriette and Raymond, in the Farmington River. No definitive explanation for Mrs. Miller's action was established, but the article reported that Mrs. Miller had been upset with, and probably jealous of her sister, Cecile Simon. See "Simsbury Woman Drowns Herself and Children Through Jealousy of Her Pretty Sister," *Hartford Courant*, March 25, 1909.

7. Many in Curtiss's audience would have known Lillian Winslow Smith when they were students. Miss Smith was a member of the Simsbury High School faculty, where she taught French and German. She later served as head of the English Department and retired from the faculty in 1951. She died on December 31, 1967, just a couple of years before Curtiss delivered his memoir.

Simsbury's Tercentenary Celebration

The 1970 Tercentenary Celebration in commemoration of Simsbury's incorporation as a town in 1670 has never been surpassed here in duration and excitement. The celebration officially opened on May 12 and events of all sorts continued until the close of festivities on October 25.

The replica of the town's first meetinghouse, newly constructed on the Simsbury Historical Society grounds, served as the backdrop for some of the opening ceremonies. Along with local dignitaries, Connecticut's Governor John N. Dempsey and U.S. Representative Thomas J. Meskill addressed the townspeople—a gathering of over 2,000—and President Richard M. Nixon telegraphed his greetings. The crowd could view the town's first schoolhouse that had recently been moved onto the grounds, watch the planting of the Tercentenary tree and board buses that would take them on a tour of historical sites, where volunteers gave skits. The day's events ended at the high school with pageant featuring the town's history.

The beard-growing competition was one of the most publicized and fun of the Tercentenary Committee's ideas. Almost 100 men who had not shaved for three months presented their beards for judging at an evening social in May. Prizes went to the fullest, the best, and the most unique beards.

Nine of the town's oldest homes were open on June 5th and 6th during the "Yankee Pedlar Turnpike Tour" house tour and flower show.

No one who was in Simsbury on June 20 will ever forget the parade of floats, bands and more that flowed along Hopmeadow Street and West Street to the high school for almost three hours. An estimated 30,000 people lined the parade route and antique and unique private planes flew overhead. There were food booths along the route and a Bavarian beer garden adjacent to the high school grounds.

The Indian Village was another highlight. Situated just east of the Pettibone Tavern, now Abigail's Grille and Wine Bar, it was a tribute to the Massaco tribe, the first inhabitants of the area. Volunteers of all ages constructed a longhouse and eight wigwams and presented programs, including a father and son campout in the village.

The Tercentenary Ball on Sunday, June 27, attracted almost 1,000 people. It was held in the Rosewood Pavilion on the grounds of the Rosewood Restaurant, where the Simsbury Inn is today. Many people dressed in colonial costumes. Lou Ball, editor of the *Farmington Valley Herald*, was the master of ceremonies who presented Tercentenary Queen Kathleen McCabe, 17, and her court, as well as performances by the Gloria Rosetti dance pupils and more. Both a big band orchestra and a rock group provided the music.

John E. Ellsworth, Chairman of the Ensign-Bickford Company, served as the general chairman of the Tercentenary Committee, and it was he who convinced Joseph Toy Curtiss to contribute the foregoing memoir of his boyhood in Simsbury. Look for more about the Tercentenary Celebration in the next issue.



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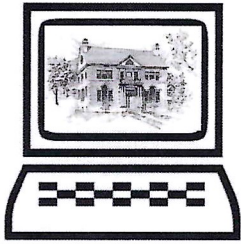
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Save the Date—Sunday, June 4, 2017 On this day the Simsbury Historical Society will have the first of a yearly series of house tours leading up to the celebration of Simsbury's 350th anniversary in 2020.



☆ Our New Website is Going Online on April 1st ☆

The Simsbury Free Library's website has been redesigned to be much more user friendly. New features include the ability to donate, join and buy books and maps online paying by credit card using PayPal. Users will be able to read back issues of the *Quarterly* and George L. Hall's World War I letters. The website will also have an easy to navigate events calendar.

The new website will also be mobile responsive, making it possible to view our website on the device of your choosing. The address is the same: www.simsburyfreelibrary.org.

Drop-In Genealogy

Saturdays, April 8 & 22, May 13, June 10 & 24, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Thursdays each week from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Researching your family tree and don't know where else to look to find missing ancestors? Bring any information you have and let genealogist Marilyn Giese help. Reservations appreciated. Free to members, \$5 for non-members.

Drop-In Book Club—Tuesdays at 11:15 a.m.

April 11: *Island at the Center of the World* by Russell Shorto

May 19: *A Man Called Ove: A Novel* by Fredrick Backman

June 14: *Sons and Daughters of Ease and Plenty: A Novel* by Ramona Ausubel

Readers looking for great discussions are always welcome. Free.

Volunteers Needed

The library has two projects in need of volunteers. The World War I letters written by George L. Hall must be typed so that they can be read by young readers. Our staff also needs help with organizing digital photos. If you have an interest in assisting in either project, please speak with Tara Willerup.

Book Now Published

Author Bibi Gaston delighted a large audience at the library in September 2015 with her pre-publication presentation about her book *Gifford Pinchot and the First Foresters: The Untold Story of the Brave Men and Women Who Launched the American Conservation Movement*. It is now available for purchase in bookstores and on Amazon.com.

In Appreciation

The Board of Trustees of the Simsbury Free Library is most grateful to Carl Walter for choosing the library to publish his Farmington Canal map series. We also would like to recognize the role our staff played in its publication. In particular, Tara Willerup applied to the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving for the grant that covered the cost of printing the maps. Proceeds from the sale of the maps will cover the cost of reprinting them in the future. Sarah Hart assisted Carl Walter with the multitude of details that need attention before a manuscript is ready for the printer and she did the job of meeting the Connecticut League of Historical Organizations' requirements for nominating him for the Award of Merit. Laura Riley also gave invaluable editorial assistance. Thank you all!

Award of Merit for Carl E. Walter

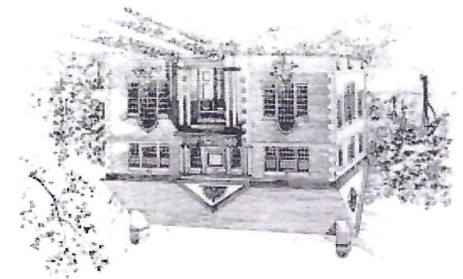
The Connecticut League of History Organizations has announced that Carl E. Walter will receive their Award of Merit for Individual Achievement for his Farmington Canal maps. In their letter informing the library, which nominated him, the CLHO wrote, "The committee was very impressed with the maps, which neatly dovetail historical information about the towns along the canal with the geography, engineering, and the construction of this amazing waterway. The map project captures and preserves Carl Walter's extensive knowledge of the canal, and shares it with historians, students, and tourists for the good of future generations."

The series of nine maps includes one for each of the towns through which the canal ran: New Haven, Hamden, Cheshire, Southington, Plainville, Farmington, Avon, Simsbury and Granby. Construction of the canal began in 1825 and it was abandoned in 1847.

The award presentation will take place during the CLHO annual conference on June 5 at the Four Points Sheraton Hotel in Meriden, Connecticut. Tickets, which are \$20, can be purchased by contacting the CLHO office at (860) 685-7595 or emailing Liz Shapiro at liz@clho.org. Maps are for sale at the library.

Our congratulations to Carl E. Walter on receiving this prestigious award!

FIRST CLASS



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Mary Jane Springman, Editor, SFL Quarterly