

## The Squeamish Town Clerk - Spring 1939

As a ten year old kid on my way to Towpath Grammar School each day, I would pass by the Town Clerk's office on the side street near Simsbury Road. Twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday, I would stop by Mrs. Woodford's office to empty the waste paper baskets and burn the trash in the incinerator behind the building. I was paid five cents for this job and that was pretty good money in those days, especially since it would buy a small bag of penny candy at the Home Circle Store on Main Street.

Kids my age were always looking for a way to earn a nickel or a dime.

It so happened that my Uncle John, who owned a large farm across the road from Riverdale Farms, told me that Hartford County was offering a bounty of ten cents for dead woodchucks. All you had to do was cut off the tail of the dead animal and present it to the Town Clerk for your bounty.

One spring day, while visiting the farm, my uncle shot a woodchuck which was digging up his vegetable garden. I had the task of burying the critter, but only after I had cut off the tail.

The next day, Tuesday, on my way home from school, I stopped by the Town Clerk's office. I received ten cents from Mrs. Woodford in exchange for the smelly woodchuck tail. The squeamish Town Clerk didn't want to touch the bushy tail and asked me to throw it into the waste paper basket.

Excited with my shiny ten cent coin I ran for the door.

"Aren't you going to empty the waste paper basket today?" asked Mrs. Woodford.

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot."

While emptying the waste paper baskets in the incinerator, out fell the woodchuck tail. What a shame to burn a beautiful tail, I thought. I wrapped the tail in an envelope which I found among the papers.

Off I ran through Mr. O'Neill's back yard. Over the cemetery fence I climbed, and with that short-cut I was at Harry Rosen's store on Main Street in no time at all.

"Where did you get the money for all that candy?" my pal Casey asked.

"From the Town Clerk's office," I said. "They're giving a ten cent bounty for woodchuck tails."

A great idea occurred to me. I gave Casey the woodchuck tail wrapped in the envelope and he went to the Town Clerk's office to collect his ten cent bounty. Again, Mrs. Woodford asked Casey to throw the disgusting, smelly tail into the waste paper basket.

On Thursday, I couldn't wait to go to work at the Town Clerk's office to empty the waste paper baskets.

Casey and I knew we shouldn't have done it again, but that same bushy tail was worth ten cents every time!

## Old Man Wilcox's Pick-Up Truck - Fall 1940

Early afternoon precisely at 3:30pm Old Man Wilcox would park his Ford pickup truck near the hedge in the parking lot adjacent to the Old Town Tavern. It was where the old Shell station was located on Main Street. He would amble into the bar for his afternoon beer.

He always wore blue farm overalls, a battered felt hat, and with his white beard stained with tobacco juice, he looked like a Norman Rockwell character. He walked with a straight stick, not a cane, and did not seem to use it for support. I guess you would call it a walking stick.

After school in the fall, if we didn't have a touch football game, we usually went to Bill Gordon's drugstore for a soda on our way home.

Not looking to get into trouble we listened to Georgie Drezek who said, "Let's jack up Old Man Wilcox's pickup."

"How are you going to do it? We'll get caught for sure," said Casey

"We'll hide behind the hedge and no one will ever see us," said George confidently.

Behind the Shell station the owner, Gordon Strong, had thrown away an old auto jack, the kind that you put under the rear axle.

Sure enough, at 3:30 sharp, Old Man Wilcox backed up his pickup with the rear wheels nearly into the hemlock hedge where we were hiding and waiting.

Off he went into the tavern.

We placed the jack under the rear axle near the middle and slowly cranked the handle until the rear wheels were off the ground about half an inch. All we had to do now was to wait and not to laugh out loud when Wilcox returned.

At 4:00 out came the old gent. He started up the Ford, put it in low gear, revved up the engine, and went nowhere. The rear wheels were spinning in place off the ground.

Wilcox turned off the engine, got out of the truck, looked at the rear wheels in the weeds near the hedge and scratched his head.

Muttering to himself he went back into the tavern, and a few minutes later came out with Henry and Primo, the owners of the bar.

In the meantime we lowered the jack and the wheels were back on the ground.

"If you put it in gear and nothing happens, the clutch must be shot," said Primo.

"I'll show you what happened," said the old man.

He revved up the engine and put it in gear. The rear wheels spun, leaving a cloud of dust, as old man Wilcox took off like a rocket. He jammed on his brakes just before hitting a parked car on Main Street.

"Damn those kids!" I just know it's those brats! Someday I'll catch them," Wilcox yelled, while waving his walking stick in a menacing fashion. "I'll get 'em!" Just you wait and see."

## Next in Line - Winter 1940

If you sat quietly looking at magazines in Clarence's Barber Shop on a Saturday morning and didn't make a nuisance of yourself, you could pick up a nickel or a dime by just being there. Clarence didn't like young kids to get haircuts on Saturdays because it was the only day off for many in town, and the men usually came into the barber shop on a weekend.

I really didn't need a haircut, but I sat in one of the six chairs lined up against the wall. There was a small oak table dividing the chairs on which my favorite magazines were stacked – Life, Look, Field and Stream, and the pink tabloid, the Police Gazette, which described the tales of lurid crime across the country.

The barber shop was a brightly painted room with a waxed linoleum rug in black and white squares, two long store front windows looking out on Main Street, and a wide mirror that stretched across the wall in front of the two cushioned barber chairs.

There were two customers in the shop, one in the chair getting a trim, and the other reading The Police Gazette. After the two got their haircuts, I was next in line. After a while another customer walked in, looked at me sitting there, and with a disappointed look on his face said to Clarence, "How long do I have to wait?" It was Primo Viti, a partner in the Old Town Tavern.

"Five minutes for Charlie in the chair and fifteen minutes for the kid waiting next in line."

Primo was always in a hurry. "I've got to be in Hartford in an hour for an important meeting. Say, kid, here's a nickel for your place in line."

I sat there looking a bit disappointed also, but it was all part of the game. I didn't say a word and continued looking at the pictures in Life magazine.

"I'll make it a dime," said Primo.

"O.K." I said, hoping that I didn't sound too anxious.

It worked every time. I took the dime next door to the Avon Drugstore to buy some candy. Everyone was happy.

A half hour later I was back in the barber shop sitting and waiting in line again. This time I went in to finish reading the article in Field and Stream about trout fishing in Vermont. I was there also to warm up because it was so cold outdoors. There was a kerosene heater in the middle of the room that provided warmth, and also heated the water for those who wanted a shave or a hot facial treatment. I remember the comfort of that room in the cold winter months.

This time I waited my turn, and when no offers turned up, I simply said to Clarence, "I've got to be home for lunch. I'll come back another time."

That Saturday was December 2<sup>nd</sup>, my eleventh birthday. The weather was very cold and the winter winds were biting. There wasn't much to do in the bitter cold, and even ice skating was out because of the wind, so I tried the barber shop one more time.

This time I sat and listened to all the old-timers swapping stories in the barber shop. Occasionally I heard a few cuss words that I never heard before, but usually the men tempered their conversations to the fact that a young kid was sitting there.

Clarence was complaining to John O'Neill, the owner of the garage next door, while he was cutting his hair, "Would you please tell your brother-in-law not to buy any more shaving brushes from me in the future?"

"Why?" asked John.

"He will order a shaving brush from me, pay for it, and then come in a week later to return it and demand his money back. He does it every time."

"What's wrong with the brushes?" asked Mr. O'Neill.

"Nothing," said Clarence. "Look at this one he returned last week. Now I'm stuck with it. I can't return it to the wholesaler. I'll have to use it in my shop."

John O'Neill examined the brush, a fancy one with a yellow handle. He compared it with a standard brush that Clarence used.

"Here's the problem." John said. "The hairs on this brush are about one inch shorter than the standard barber shop brush."

Now John E. Leonard, who was married to O'Neill's sister Kathleen, the school teacher, was the best maker of trout flies in Hartford County. Could it be that John O'Neill just gave Clarence the clue as to the reason why John Leonard returned all those shaving brushes?

Clarence said, "He must be cutting the brown and gray hairs off my brushes to use them in tying his trout flies."

Finally, Clarence the barber caught up with the machinations of Avon's expert fly fisherman. Later, Mr. Leonard tried the same thing with "Basi" the barber, who took over Clarence's business – but "Basi" had been warned about this scheme.

I sat there in the barber shop, amused by all the stories that were tossed about, until it was my turn to get a haircut. This time I got a trim to my "butch haircut" and it didn't cost me a penny. As a matter of fact, Clarence gave me a dime and sent me home.

I got all my haircuts free. I was the only kid in town who could spend his idle moments "sitting next in line" at the barber shop on a Saturday in December.

You see, Clarence the barber was not only my friend and barber, he was also my godfather.

## **The Longest Homerun on Record - Summer 1941**

I remember the summer well. It was the last summer of baseball for many of the players of the Avon Town Team in the Farmington Valley League. Soon the United States would go to war after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

This was the last season for my oldest brother Hank, a diminutive shortstop with a good arm, and, despite his size, a hefty slugger at the plate. The following summer he would be in the U.S. Army.

The Avon "Townies," as they were called, played their home games at Sperry Park, a baseball field unique in many ways.

The land was donated to the town of Avon by Frank Sperry who loved the game of baseball. The playing field was well kept and the infield grass mowed and groomed by the players themselves. The outfield grass didn't need much cutting at all because a neighbor down the road tethered two cows in the outer pastures every day and the cows chewed the grass evenly.

It was about 350 feet down the left field foul line to the railroad tracks. In center field, about 400 feet straight away, was a huge oak tree. Right field was simply open field where spectators parked their cars around the periphery of the playing surface.

Every Sunday afternoon the four o'clock train from the New Haven-Northampton Line would interrupt the game as it chugged slowly through town. The umpires had to be alert to stop the game in progress while the train passed by.

One bright, sunny afternoon when the "Townies" were playing their arch-rivals, the Collinsville "Axes," the umpires must have been deaf. Every spectator and all the players heard the whistle as the train approached Avon center. The umpires failed to halt the game as the train went by travelling slowly to the south.

The game was in the ninth inning with Avon trailing by a score of 3-1, with two outs and two men on base. My brother Hank was at the plate. Rube Horn, the crafty Collinsville pitcher, threw the ball. Whack, was the sound of the bat hitting the baseball, as Hank blasted the pitch down the left field alley. The long fly ball reached the railroad tracks and landed on the coal car, right behind the engine, as the train passed by.

The engineer tooted his whistle with two short blasts for the spectators as he did every Sunday, and then continued on his way.

As Hank rounded the bases in his home run trot, the white baseball could be seen on the black coal car as the train pulled out of town headed for New Haven.

The Avon "Townies" won the game that Sunday, 4-3, on the longest home run on record: 375 feet plus 38 miles to New Haven on the train!

## **A Date That Will Live in Infamy - Winter 1941**

Where were you and what were you doing on December 7, 1941?

As everyone knows, that was the day the Japanese Imperial Government attacked Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian Island of Oahu.

It was Sunday afternoon. After lunch about two o'clock, I decided to walk to the center of Avon. The Avon Drugstore was displaying Christmas gifts for sale with a special discount, and I was anxious to see them. If you purchased certain items during the fall, you were given special discount play money, much like the paper money used in the game monopoly. You could use the different colored paper money for a discount. For instance, an eight dollar watch could cost you six dollars in cash and two dollars in discount "funny money" if you wished.

I sat on a stool at the soda fountain while Bill Gordon and his wife decorated the huge display windows on each side of the entrance. Rocky, the pharmacist, was busy in the back of the store making up a prescription. The radio on the shelf over the cigarette counter carried the broadcast of the Giants football game. Rocky was an avid fan of any New York team, and the Yankees were his favorite team.

After finishing the prescription for old George Smith, who sat waiting in one of the booths at the far end of the store, Rocky came to the soda fountain. Smitty, the house painter, was always getting a prescription filled, it seemed.

"What'll you have, Billy," asked Rocky.

"A small cherry coke."

The radio blared away. The Giants were winning the football game. Suddenly the game was interrupted. Bob Trout of CBS radio said, "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a special bulletin. The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. At 7:55 a.m., Hawaiian time, Japanese airplanes bombed...."

On and on went the special news broadcast. What did this mean? Would the United States go to war? I asked myself these questions. I had just turned 12 years old the week before, and I guess I was too young to realize the gravity of it all.

Bill Gordon and his wife gasped because they had a son Tom who was old enough to be drafted. Rocky said that he would try to join the army, although he was already turned down by the peacetime draft board because of a health problem. Old George Smith was just that – too old for the army.

When the German army attacked Poland to start World War II in 1939, the war seemed too remote for us to worry about. After all, we were neutral. But this?

The following day President Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war, calling December 7, 1941, "a date that will live in infamy."

We heard the broadcast on the radio at home late in the afternoon when Roosevelt spoke those famous words. We didn't know the meaning of the word "infamy" so I looked up the word in the dictionary.

The next four years would remind us daily what "infamy" meant as our brothers, sisters and uncles went off to war.