President's Message

The Springfield Historical Society will meet on Tuesday evening, April 17, 2001 at 7 p.m. in the Springfield Town Hall. The Harvey Tavern Singers, represented by Cindy Johnson, Fred Ogmundson and Carlton Bradford will render an evening of Stephen Foster and Civil War Ballads, excerpts from their annual Muster Field Farm show. Mr. Bradford will precede this with a short historical background of the Harvey family. Please join us!

The Springfield Historical Society is celebrating the reopening of our Country Store with this issue of our newsletter. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Verna Philbrick Cote, now living in Florida, for the contributions she has made to the Springfield Historical Society over the years.

THE COUNTRY STORE

With the news of the much anticipated reopening of our Country Store by Mr. And Mrs. Darrin Davis, it seemed timely to tell something of the history of the store through the early 1940’s. It was the center of life in West Springfield. It was the place where workmen ate lunch, talked politics, played cards, and picked up the daily mail. Much of the information will be excerpts from the recollections of Verna Philbrick Cote written in 1983. Verna worked at the store in the mid 1930’s and early 1940’s.

The West Springfield village store dates back to 1825 when Daniel N. Adams and Emory Woods set up business. Within a couple of years, Woods sold his interest to Dr. Joseph Nichols. They may have added to the building already there or have built a new structure. Mr. Adams’ partners changed from time to time, but he was the one owner who continued to own the store until 1885, when at age 85 Daniel Adams sold the store to Ruel L. Heath. Ruel operated the store until 1918 when he sold it to Charles and Margaret Bailey. As their health declined, their daughter Pauline and her husband Bernard Rudner helped out and eventually became the owners. These are the years that Verna remembers. The family lived upstairs over the store.

In the early 1930’s there was no electricity in town [It would soon arrive in most parts of town before 1940.] On dark days and nights, Verna remembers the store being lighted by a tall kerosene lamp in the post office and by two gasoline lanterns which could be hung up. Their twin little mantles were quite open to the weather, and if hit by a fly or a bug, they would break. It was Verna’s job to replace the mantles and to fill the tanks with white gas and pump them full of air in the morning to be ready for the coming evening.

The plumbing at the store consisted of one cold water faucet which ran into a six inch funnel stuck into a drain pipe. The water came from the heated upstairs and supposedly the big chunk stove kept the downstairs warm enough so nothing froze. The toilet was a one hole out through two sheds and off the horse barn. [It seemed “miles away” to Verna.]

The first attached shed contained the bags of beans such as red kidney, yelloweye, and pea beans. These were packaged by the clerk into paper bags and tied with a string at the top. The potatoes which came in a barrel with a burlap top on it, were there too and had to be packaged into pecks of 15 210lb. Usually there were rotten ones on the bottom with a most terrible smell. Around the corner in the shed were nails, all penny sizes, in neat little square boxes for each size. Paper sacks bought by the big bales were there too, near the foot of the stairs going to the upstairs kitchen. The short hall on the other side held crosscut saws and ax handles of different lengths suspended from the wall. There would also be a horse collar or two, steel and
wooden wedges, maybe a hammer or a sledge hammer. Hardware came on the stage from a store in Concord, N.H. And they kept only two of lots of things. Verna claims that it worked as well as today’s system. Even if there was a run on horse collars, by the next night some more would be there from Concord.

To the left were the cellar stairs. For such a big building, the cellar was pretty small, perhaps 16x12. There was a salt pork barrel in brine with chunks of 3 to 4 lb. pieces. You took a piece up to the scale in the store, cut off the chunk big enough for the customer’s Saturday bean pot and put the rest back downstairs until the next time. They kept bags of hard salt for brining your own things and for pickling. Farther on beyond the big door where the wholesaler unloaded the wares, the alcohol and molasses barrels were kept. The molasses barrel had a specialbung type wooden tap on it. Everyone brought in their own crockery molasses jug, and you put a funnel into the neck and turned on the spicket and as Verna says, “You waited, and waited, and waited, especially in the winter!” The alcohol was for car radiators and winter antifreeze.

Nearby was a hand pump for kerosene with a glass container on top. You set a gauge and then hand pumped it until it was full. Then you drained the kerosene into a customer’s own can and replaced the potato which covered the snout so they could get it home full. It was used for lighting homes. The store also carried lamp shades or chimneys. They were glass and were always getting broken at home, and wicks needed to be replaced occasionally. Beyond there were the cartons of things like matches, always kitchen style. These were kept in the shed away from everything else for fire safety. Also in the shed part of the store were rolls of zinc which was used for countertops in many kitchens and to put around the chimney holes and stove pipes. Also available were sections of stove pipe and big panes of glass for windows. The store had a small glass cutter. Verna never tried to cut a pane from the big one, but Pauline was very good at it.

In the main store, the post office cubbyholes were on the right as you entered. You had to ask for your mail and the clerk had to hand it out. Leo Duford started as mailman about the time that Verna began working at the store. He carried the mail to West Andover where it was put on the train for Concord. There was quick service to Boston. You could send Sears Roebuck an order with a postal money order enclosed and get your package back to you on the third day, never fail, even around Christmas time when many people sent in big orders. The daily papers were also delivered by the morning stage. Someone from upstairs came down to help the customers who came in to the store during the time the mail was being sorted.

Beyond the post office was a glass covered case for dry goods, needles, pins, tapes, thread, elastic and scissors all in small quantity, but a great variety. Cloth in bolts was on the shelves as well as heavy woolen pants, “Soo” from Sioux St. Marie in Wisconsin. Everybody wore them in the winter along with woolen shirts. It was your winter outfit, and nobody worried about washing them. By Spring they were worn out. Heavy woolen felt footwear known as “coontails” [the stripes went around the legs]
could also be purchased. The store also sold shoes.

In the corner was the big green desk. It had an old typewriter and it was another job for Verna to send out the bills every month. Pauline wrote whatever she wished and sealed them. This was depression time, so nearly all had messages. Pauline kept her accordion in the corner there and played a little every day to keep in practice. Near the shelves of batteries and gas cans and non freezables on the back wall, every winter Pauline set up a ping pong table or a miniature bowling game and a box with four 2 x 4's for legs for days when the weather was bad. All the choppers would come around and play whist or 113 and smoke. The air would be blue with smoke, but they bought their cigarettes there and soft drinks and took home what groceries they could afford. Bananas and oranges and some lemons were in their crates on the floor near the stove to keep them from freezing. When Verna was a child she remembers the red machine that ground the coffee sat there also, but when she was old enough to work there, the coffee was coming in cans or the coffee beans were coming in bags, and each home had their own coffee grinder. In the middle of the store to greet you as you came into the store was the candy case. It had penny candy on one side and boxes of good chocolates on the other. The good ones came in five pound boxes and were sold by the ¼ or maybe ½ pound in paper bags. When most men went on Saturday night to pay their bill, they brought home to the wife and kids some chocolates and penny candy. In back of that was the tobacco case. The top lifted up only from the clerk's side, but many was the time Verna saw hands letting it back down when she came in from the back shed after getting something else.

One side of the store had a space for a display which Verna changed every week according to the sales on the flyer from the wholesaler in Claremont. One day Verna had piled tomato soup cans in a tower. She was standing alone near the stove and looking at them from a side view when they began to sway back and forth. Looking out the window, she could see Libbie Cass's barn across the road and the windows were jiggling around. Then came a rumble and Verna was in her first earthquake!

The front windows always had to be washed and the shelves cleaned with vinegar and hot water for the glass, and ammonia and water for the shelves. A back room from the main store had a window, but was colder than the rest so in there was kept eggs brought in by the customers. They were brought in baskets just piled up and were then counted out into boxes, keeping the oldest to be sold first. When you bought a half dozen eggs, they were handed to you in a paper bag knocking against each other and it was your responsibility to get them home whole!

There were two telephones in the store with different bells. One was the Grantham, Croydon line and the other was the Sunapee line. Everybody was on the same line in their direction and many times when Pauline wanted to get news quickly to all the people, she would ring the party, ask them to hold on, two rings and ask the next party to hang on etc. And when she had several on the line, would relay her message of urgency. It cost several cents to call from one town exchange to the other by ordinary methods, so Verna and Pauline would answer
one telephone and relay the message too
someone living on the other exchange.
Outside were the gasoline pumps. Before
electricity, they were pumped by hand. There
was a glass enclosed tank on the top into which
you pumped the number of gallons you wanted
and then turned a lever to drain it by gravity into
your automobile tank.

The Country Store has played an important
role in the lives of West Springfield's natives,
residents and visitors for many years. No wonder
it is missed when, on rare occasions, it has
closed for short periods of time. May it continue
successfully for at least another 176 years!

Patsy Heath Caswell with recollections
of Verna Philbrick Cote

The Country Store
By Fairfax Downey
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Some sing of proud emporium

Of city dry goods mart -
Great hives where busy shoppers hum
Through stocks, complete and smart;
The scenes of many a hard-fought fray
When bargain day enchants,
And where colossal white sales may
include some elephants;
Where anything and everything
Is purchased by the score,

Come, Muse, a homelier ditty sing:
The good, old country store.

Lanterns and seeds and overalls
Are neighbors on the shelves.
Flour and salt sacks line the walls
By axe and hatchet helves.

They've shotgun shells and whetstone cakes
And stuff potato bugs
Can eat and die of stomach aches;
And spark and chewing plugs.
There's no revolving door to spin;
No elevators soar,
But all you need is handy in
The good, old country store.

Of egg preservative they keep
A plentiful supply
To douse 'em in when eggs are cheap
And bring 'em out when high.
There's paint and beans and turpentine,
Hinges and fishhooks binned,
Some cow-ease and some balls of twine.
Though crackers now are tinned,
The pork is still in barrels fat,
Beloved of Senator,
But pork is far less costly at
The good, old country store.

There's butter paper, cotton spools,
Matches and soap, of course;
Suspenders, linseed oil and tools,
And collars - for a horse;
Bandanas - handkerchief supreme
And maple sugar sweet,
Dry cells and separators (cream)
And bales for towel and sheet.
As for that pompous gentleman
Who grandly walks the floor,
He's better in the city than
The good, old country store.

Molasses, hog feed, fish poles, nails,
A cat and cans of tea.

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Cloth gloves and gasoline and mails,
And honest policy.
A friendly place, a kindly place,
Where credit stretches far.
Amid its calm, unhurried pace
Both peace and commerce are.
While Polly puts the sugar up,

A hearty toast we'll pour.
So come lift high your cider cup! -
The good, old country store.

[Fairfax Downey was a well known author, historian
and resident of Springfield, NH]