

Growing Up on Larch Row

I live in a modern house on Larch Row in the northwest corner of the big meadow in front of the Timothy Pickering house, where I grew up. Every morning when I sip my coffee I gaze out at the rolling field divided by a ditch and framed by the trees along the edges, and I see something different. Recently I watched five deer in dark winter coats grazing in the meadow on an unusually warm and hazy day. Earlier I had watched a fox with his big brush tail held high, “mousing” through the snow. In summer, the cluster of English lindens, now on the National List of Historic Trees that was planted when Timothy Pickering lived in the house in the 1700s, appears like one big lush tree. Word of mouth has it that it was originally thirteen saplings planted in the shape of P for Pickering to symbolize the thirteen original colonies.

I try to imagine what the inhabitants of the house – its oldest parts date to the 1690s - saw when they looked out over the meadow. The original front door of their house faced south. Larch Row, a dirt carriage road, went through the field right in front of the house to cross the Miles River where it was shallow. Since then, the direction of Larch Row has been moved and I understand that it was Timothy Pickering who planted the now tall larch trees all along the farm’s northern boundary lining the road.

When my parents, Jimmy and Betty Reynolds, bought the farm in the early 1930s, it was called The Larches. They renamed it Larch Farm. Back then the house was heated by a coal furnace, and their handyman, Rathé, came from Ipswich on the train to stoke the fire at 5 A.M., so the house would be warm for breakfast. I was born in 1939 a month after the Nazis invaded Poland and have vague memories of black out preparations in case we were bombed. The heavy tape remained on the shutters in our library for a long time. There was talk of gas rationing and of my mother being carried out of the house on a stretcher in a practice drill – I’m told my sister was terrified and I was asleep. Our mother

also trained at the Beverly Hospital to be a nurse's aide. The only clear memory I have of the war is of dancing on the lawn to celebrate VJ day in August 1945.

For me a dairy farm was a wondrous place to grow up. In summer we had an enormous vegetable garden intended to feed us in winter. I may have been four years old when I took my New York cousin, Jeanie, into the strawberry patch for a private feast, leaving all the adults searching the bull pen, railroad tracks, and Larch Row for the two lost children. We did not consider ourselves lost at all! We had an English setter named LuLu who slept in front of the fire each night, often with her legs twitching. We assumed she was dreaming of chasing a rabbit, and when we spoke to her she would thump her lovely feathered tail on the rug. Soon after that we got two springer spaniels named Robert and Tinkerbelle. There were barn cats, but they were not invited in the house because they were to keep the rodents out of the barn. All the Guernsey cows were named, and they had signs hung over their heads that helped the dairymen keep records of how much milk each produced. The cow barn was large with a long stretch of stanchions where the cows were milked every day. There were box stalls around the ends of the barn for calves and heifers. Our eggs and milk were sold from the dairy. Neighbors came in a steady flow with suitable containers for bringing their supplies home. They paid when they could.

The hay loft was on the second story and the majestic and smelly silo reached high into the sky. There was a pig sty, a bull barn with a high fenced in area, a maternity barn and a chicken coop. I loved it, smells and all. I found it comforting to be around the animals. The pigs were grunty and snorty as they pummeled the cow manure to help it age, and to keep their skin moist. Pigs do not sweat and can get sunburned. One year, before the pig pen got a roof, one of the pigs died of sunburn. I remember vividly a run-in I had with a broody hen when I went to collect the eggs. She came after me squawking, pecking and flapping her wings, and I was terrified.

The railroad tracks, with their steam engines belching black smoke, were always an important part of our lives. They had a regular schedule and visitors were the only people who were interrupted by the noise because the rest of us just accepted them as an everyday occurrence. Eventually, those huge engines were replaced in favor of the commuter trains of today. Our neighbors, the Luxtons, lived in a small brown house right by the railroad crossing that was built for the man who stopped the traffic every time a train came through. He had a sign on a stick that he turned from **STOP** on one side and **GO** on the other.

I had a neighborhood of friends all along Larch Row at various times in my life and I think about our escapades as I walk to Crosby's Market through Enon Village or to the Congregational Church in Wenham Center. Walking west, old Mrs. Armington with her ancient brown dog lived in the small gambrel near the road where her grandson, Bryan, and wife, Beth, live now. My dear friend Abigail Trafford lived in the next house. It had two grand pianos in the living room where her parents played beautiful classical music together. I thought their family culture was Bohemian and artsy and loved being a part of it, I suppose because it was the direct opposite of my conventional household at the farm. Abigail and I rode our bikes all around Wenham stopping often for penny candy at Mr. Chadder's store. One day, when we were older, maybe 11, Abigail suggested that we ride our bikes to see her cousin Perry in Beverly. We had great fun riding over there, but our parents were not happy about our biking so far away and we never did it again.

If I stand in front of the big house today and look west across the fields, I see the what was the Fairfield family house. Johnny was my friend. I remember hiding with him in a small dugout where, covered with pine boughs, we blew into a 'crow call' which attracted dozens of crows into the trees. Several years after that the Fairfields moved away and my first cousin Phil Reynolds moved in with his wife, Lea, and their brood of

six kids. Another neighbor was Mrs. Bruce who was fast with needle and thread. Mum would buy school dresses for me at Best & Co. in Boston and take them to Mrs. Bruce to be hemmed. She was round and wrinkly and dressed in a housecoat, but she was able to kneel on the floor while balancing straight pins on her puffy lower lip. She would ask me to turn around and around 'til the hem was pinned in place. She chatted away with my mother and miraculously never lost a pin.

Just the other day I chatted with Marty Carr at the Council on Aging painting class and was reminded of her family, the Wildes. She lives in the house where she was raised and I remember her brothers helping at the farm during hay season. They were probably in high school, or just graduated, but to me they seemed so grown up, strong and capable. Marty and I talked about the warm feelings we have about Wenham and the comfort that brings us. Living and looking over the land and reminiscing, I am aware of how things have changed but realize they are surface changes – a barn burned down or a house built. What has remained is the community where I was nurtured as a child and young adult and then returned to with my husband and children in the early 1980s when we built our house. At age 78, having lived most of my life here, I feel embraced by the strong roots I have in this historic town.