

“Life in Wenham”
Writing Contest

375th
Town of Wenham
Anniversary Celebration
1643-2018

Literature Night
Wednesday, March 14, 2018
Wenham Town Hall

“Life in Wenham”

“Words on Wenham’s Water” by Ernest Ashley

“My Life in Wenham” by Dianne Bucco

“Growing up on Larch Row” by Buffy Colt

“Wenham Straw Babies” by Susan Doughty

“At Home in Wenham” by Carrie Jelsma

“Ready for Wenham” by Barrie Levine

“It was about 3 inches by 5 inches...” by Tom Spofford

“Words on Wenham’s Water” by Ernest Ashley

I would like to share with you how Wenham water works. We have a valuable resource here that we all must share and that we can be proud of. Perhaps some in-depth information would be useful and may be of interest to the community. My name is Ernest Ashley and I am a Commissioner for the Town of Wenham’s Water Department. I am also a hydrogeologist and find this stuff really cool so, maybe, you will too.

Where does our water come from? How is it treated? Is it good for us? How much is there? Why do we have water restrictions? etc. Let me start out with geography.

Wenham’s water supply is sourced from two wells located south of Pleasant Pond along a bend in Pleasant Street. The distribution system extends throughout the towns and connects at the boundaries with systems from adjacent towns. If needed, water could be transferred from one town to another but in normal operation, the valves are always closed. We have two tanks that provide storage and pressure to the system; one on Lord’s Hill near the Beverly Airport and one at the Iron Rail property.

Now for some geology. Our water is drawn from a confined aquifer, meaning a sand and gravel layer from which we can pump water and, which lies beneath a thick, widespread clay layer that separates it from the surface and the shallower water table above. The wells are next to the Great Wenham Swamp and near the Ipswich River. Our aquifer is recharged from water in these and other wetlands. This is a good thing. It is a really good thing. The organic material in the wetlands purifies the water (more on that later) and it is filtered through the clay layer and the sand and gravel in the aquifer on the way to our wells. Our water is moderately hard. What is so hard about water? Hardness

makes it hard to make soap suds and leaves a white stuff behind when it dries. Our water has a lot less iron and manganese (metals that stain your fixtures – and laundry) than some other nearby systems. It is good stuff.

Before water is distributed throughout the town, we add three things: a corrosion inhibitor and chlorine to keep it safe and fluoride. Let's start with the corrosion inhibitor; zinc orthophosphate. This non-toxic chemical prevents the copper in water pipes and lead that may be in pipes or solder from leaching out and getting into your drinking water. This is what was missing with tragic consequences when Flint Michigan recently made changes to its water supply. As required by the MassDEP and the USEPA, we also add just enough chlorine to kill all the bacteria and viruses that might contaminate the water.

We add a minimal amount of fluoride. Fluoride in drinking water was, and in some places still is, controversial. However, the overwhelming evidence is that it is safe and has resulted in one of the most striking improvement in human health. Fluoride is incorporated into our teeth and bones making both much stronger. Just think of how many fewer cavities our children have than those of us over 50 did when we were young. And as my dentist keeps telling me, good oral health is key to good overall health. We test the water in schools and at various locations throughout the distribution system and confirm that the trace levels of metals and chemicals are well below levels considered safe. Each year we produce a Consumer Confidence Report that provides the results of our testing. Please contact the Wenham Water Department if you have any questions. It is good for you. Please enjoy use and enjoy Wenham water.

Water is the ultimate renewable, recyclable, and sustainable resource – except when isn't. We live in Enon, an early name for Wenham which means “much water”. A great portion of the town and surrounding area is wetlands including the Great Wenham Swamp. Our area is blessed with relatively consistent rainfall and snow melt totaling about 33” a year. Of that about a third runs off, more than a third evaporates and less than a third soaks into the ground to sustain our groundwater source. The runoff and more importantly, the groundwater sustains our wetlands, rivers and streams. All in all, it is a beautiful system to capture, purify, filter and enhance the rainwater that recharges a limited resource.

Did I say limited? I did, because each year there is a limited amount of recharge and we all live in the same “bucket” that is the Ipswich River Basin. Although extensive and blessed with typically abundant rainfall, the basin is populated by lots of water users. In general, we in Wenham can and usually do, live within the “yield” of the basin. During times of drought and/or excessive water use, the basin is in a “negative balance”; and streams and rivers dry up. The groundwater levels throughout the basin determine the water levels in our streams and rivers.

Time histories show that summer water levels in the Ipswich River are typically lower than historic summer levels. This may be due to long-term trends in weather but is certainly also the increasing development and water withdrawals. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, (MassDEP), has developed “safe yield” values for how much water can be taken from the basin and still support the life of and in the rivers. During periods of excessive use for irrigation, towns and cities can exceed the safe yield of the basin.

Irrigation is key here. If done right it produces an abundance of greenery, product and produce. But done excessively or inefficiently, it results in a lot of water lost due to evaporation. We have bylaws in Wenham that limit the time of day you can water so as to limit evaporation loss. We have a bylaw that applies water restrictions to private wells because, as noted above, we are all in the same bucket. Comparing the winter water use to the summer months tells us how much water we use for basic household and community needs, and how much more is used in the summer, primarily for watering lawns.

But why do *WE* have water restrictions? The short answer is because MassDEP tells us we do. Now for the long-winded version. When the water levels drops till the flow gage on the Ipswich River drops below 52.5 cubic feet/second (393 gallons a second over a spillway), the MassDEP tells us we have to impose a water ban. It's a river! That's not much water! Water levels in the area surrounding the river are what sustains the river flow. It's the "we're all in the same bucket" concept.

I emphasized *we* because some of us have noticed how other communities, just down the street from us do not have the same water restrictions. While our drinking water is from a groundwater source, the Salem/Beverly water system is comprised of three reservoirs: Putnamville, Longwood and Wenham Lake. Yep, Wenham Lake, ice supply to the Queen of England, is not part of our water system. Sorry folks, I was not on the water commission when that deal was made.

The much larger Salem/Beverly system, withdraws water from the Ipswich River during periods of abundant flow. That occurs most of the year except the summer so they cannot pump anymore water from the river during the summer and must rely on the

supply they have stored. They do not pump groundwater from the basin during the summer so their water use makes no difference to the water levels in the river. Hence, no water restrictions in Beverly and Mandatory Water Conservation in Wenham. But they still shouldn't water during the day!!!

We have two levels of water restrictions. The first is "Mandatory Water Conservation". Sounds serious, and intentionally so. It basically means follow our bylaws (no watering from 9:00 am till 5:00 pm). A Water Ban occurs when the water level in the Ipswich River drops below the 52.5 cubic feet per second levels. This usually happens in the early summer often despite how much snow we have. But what's a Water Commissioner to do? I want our place to look good too, and I have some grass seed to plant. Well, there are ways to have a healthy lawn and use very little water. I am going to get the seed out there early, and once it is established I am going to keep it a bit long to conserve water.

Is it good water? Oh yes. I travel for work and when I can, for pleasure. I always notice how water smells and tastes and how it runs off your skin in the shower. Every time I come home I notice our water seems "just right". So, I hope you will use, conserve and enjoy Wenham water.

Ernest Ashley is an environmental consultant and hydrogeologist with CDM Smith in Boston, MA. He serves as Chairman of the Wenham Water Commissioners and is a founding member of the Massachusetts Geological Society.

“My life in Wenham” by Dianne Bucco

Twenty seven years ago in January, our offer was accepted for the purchase of a house in Wenham. It was our first house. Oh what joy but oh boy what to do now? Once the purchase was complete and we were actual homeowners, we then had to start combining our two lives and all of our “stuff”. As we did that, we met our neighbors and they loved to share information about Wenham. We learned about how the Town was governed by Town Meeting and that all registered voters were expected to attend. I was told about the Wenham Village Improvement Society and all that the organization does for the Town. I was encouraged by the former owner of our house as well as by the very nice next door neighbor to join. I believe I was told it was the “thing” to do once you moved to Town. I listened to all the advice began to get connected to the community although both my husband and I were working full time outside of the Town. We met new friends through the WVIS and the neighborhood. It was a wonderful time to start out as a new couple in our own house in a new Town.

Soon our household grew to include a dog and so I headed to Town Hall to meet the Town Clerk, Fran Young who held that position for over 10 years. Fran was just one person who made a big impression on me. She was so happy that we were residents and now had added a dog to our family. She explained how the dog licensing worked as well as almost everything we needed to know as new residents. She was always welcoming regardless of the amount of times we asked her question after question about the workings of the Town. Adding children to our family not only enlarged our family circle but also our friend circle especially as we entered the school system.

Although we outgrew the house (or so we thought) and had to expand it, we never outgrew the Town. Being involved in the lives of my children plus events such as Town Meeting, local elections, WVIS summer programs along with the school events kept us very busy and content.

Time went on and the kids grew up and I again began to work outside the home. I stayed within the community because well, why would I look elsewhere, as my whole life was here. As the children continued to grow and start to move out, we felt as if our house (now too large for us) would be perfect for another family as it had been for us. We looked to move. By this time, I had become completely rooted in Wenham that moving out of Wenham never even entered into our minds.

Looking back, I knew nothing about Wenham prior to 1991 nor was I aware of the satisfaction received from working for your community. It may be true in other communities as well but from my perspective, being the elected Town Clerk for the Town of Wenham is the best and is one of my finest accomplishments.

“Growing up on Larch Row” by Buffy Colt

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.

“Wenham Straw Babies” by Susan Doughty

We moved to Wenham 24 years ago and were delighted to be near a park and a tree farm.

Always loving animals and nature, I abandoned the unpacking process and walked our then dog, Daniel in the Tree Farm. I met an older gentleman tending to a grapevine. Moments later, it was abundantly clear that he was extremely informed and experienced with flora and fauna.

After explaining we had just moved in that day, he was kind enough to offer a brief history of the Wenham Swamp walk and invite my family to join the next one scheduled. It was a beautiful day on September 30th, 1994 and the conversation flowed. He was fascinating to talk to and I could have stayed there all day. Besides, I was away from the moving boxes. I just couldn't figure out why he kept looking at my feet at intervals during the conversation. I chalked it up to the goofy looking, funky colored flip flops I was wearing. Not being very enthusiastic about computers, I was thrilled with my new acquaintance, a walking encyclopedia named Albie who answered all my gardening questions with ease.

Finally I looked at my feet to explore what might be eliciting his attention. With that, Albie stated, "Excuse me, but you are standing on my baby asparagus plants. MYSTERY SOLVED, but in my defense, they were under a layer of straw. Over the years, Albie Dodge would visit us in our yard, sit a spell and share great stories. Can't imagine talking about Wenham history without his name coming up.

Susan Doughty/Contented Wenham Resident.

“At Home In Wenham: Glimpses Of The Perfect...And Not So Perfect” by Carrie Jelsma

September, 2006

A month ago, shortly after we moved to Wenham from St. Thomas, my husband was unexpectedly hospitalized needing emergency surgery. Yesterday, after a power surge caused a black out in our new house, my two young children and I dragged our mattresses into the sunroom so we can escape in case of a fire. Even though National Grid restored our power, they're worried about potential fire hazards until they determine the cause of the surge. I'm not moving out because I'm due to give birth to our third child any day. I figure we can jump out of the sunroom windows or doors easily enough if the place torches. Most of our belongings haven't arrived yet from St. Thomas so that'd all be spared too, in case of a fire. It's a bit much, but we're fine and my husband will be OK and home soon. That's what I'm telling myself and it's helping.

Amidst this trying transition, the doorbell rings. It's the neighbors—multiple neighbor ladies. They're armed with prepared meals, drills and screw drivers, warm smiles, funny jokes, and alcohol for those who aren't currently “prego.” They unpack boxes, hang pictures, move furniture, play with our kids, give us and set up a portable crib, then come back again with some size 8 kicky fall black boots. I arrived with plenty of beachy flip flops, but no kicky fall black boots—which I learned is a New England woman's fall wardrobe must-have. I exhale a little deeper this day, even though I didn't think I had any more room in my diaphragm.

October, 2006

I arrived home last night after giving birth to our third child at Beverly Hospital. I'm simultaneously exhausted and elated. My husband and other children are out forging their new lives at work and school. While getting to know my new love, I'm painfully unsettled amidst the remaining unpacked boxes, organized chaos of a recent move, and mounds of baby gear. My son and I don our fall coats and venture into the neighborhood. I purposefully--and gingerly--push the stroller down the hill away from the house. I'm looking for the neighbors who'd said they may be around. Kelly drives by and exclaims "What're you doing out?! You're back from having the baby?" I reply "Yeah...this is him!" Kelly smirks. "Well you SHOULD be home resting but follow me. Some of us are down the street." While I sipped coffee amidst a cacophony of "Ooos", "Awwwws" "How'd It go?" and "What's His Name?", my unsettled feeling subsides as seeds of home are further planted.

December, 2008

It's blustery. I have multiple large packages and three wiggly kids to get unpacked from the van on Main Street and into the post office on December 21st – about the last day to mail gifts so they'll arrive in time for Christmas, a.k.a. the busiest day at the post office at a frantic time of year. Yes! I get a parking spot right in front! After wrangling our seven-, five- and two-year old into the lobby and imploring them to "stay right there where I can see you" and "not run into the street", I wrestle the unwieldy boxes into the

lobby next to my gaggle of kids. Dang! The five-year old makes a run for the door. I snag him before he gets outside. As I let out a bedraggled, irritated sigh, I feel a soft touch on my forearm. I peer through the ponytail escapees that hang in my face. An elderly woman says to me kindly, empathetically, “It IS a lot now. Remember, it’s also glorious and try to enjoy it. I’ll be alone this holiday.” She’s bleary-eyed from the wind gusting in as my five-year old is pulling open the door again, but she sees more clearly than I do. I continue to feel that soft touch on my forearm as a friendly reframe, long after that holiday season has passed.

June, 2010

My friend is from Central America and she moved from the West Coast to Massachusetts recently with her husband and sons. Wanting to pay some Wenham hospitality forward and welcome them to Massachusetts, we invite them over for some casual fun about town, a cookout, and lots of catching up around the firepit. While we’re at the Wenham Teahouse playground, one of my friend’s sons needs a bathroom urgently! I send them both to a local retail shop because it’s quicker to get to than our home. It’s where we go to the bathroom in a pinch.

About 15 minutes later they return. My friend walks toward me while her son resumes playing with the other kids. I joke, “Either you guys are super efficient, didn’t make it in time, or couldn’t find it!” My friend asks to go back to our home to use the restroom. I offer “If you can watch the other kids, I’m happy to take him to the closer bathroom. No

problem.” She quietly, uncomfortably again asks to return to our home. “We were told to leave because they said we didn’t belong there.”

April, 2013

I’m going to run 5k races again. I’m going to start with Melody Miles, followed by Gabe’s Run, and I’m going to train on the Danvers Rail Trail—it’s close, nice, flat, I like the crunch of the gravel under my ASICS, and the boardwalk feels like a hug from mother nature. I’m sucking wind hard at the 3k mark and am ready to stop. A powerhouse of a human runs toward me. She pumps her fist as she passes me. “Keep it up!” I jog another kilometer.

December, 2013

The Miles River Middle School (MRMS) students are sitting in a classroom at some other middle school – Shore Country Day, I think. After all the years of extracurriculars, the myriad schools are kind of a blur, but this moment’s in focus. It’s the Massachusetts Educational Theater Guild Drama Fest regional competition and MRMS is preparing to rock it.

The middle schoolers wrote an original script about dementia entitled “Forget The Rest”. They cast, blocked and act it out, largely on their own, but also under the tutelage and care of skilled, gifted and dedicated drama teachers. They would end up coming

home with awards, and even more important, a well-rounded, enriched depth of experience like none I'd seen in my middle school days.

But at this moment, I peer through the window of their designated classroom door, and see my daughter reading her personalized letter that the wonder-directors have written and delivered to each student prior to the show. She's full of emotion, pride, excitement, motivation, enthusiasm---she's firing on all cylinders and having the time of her life. It was a tough start to middle school for her last year, but at this moment, I realize all is well. Through the festival experience, and the drama teachers' supportive embrace and deft guidance, our daughter wrote a script and acted on a stage. It enabled her to resume writing her own script and acting on the stage of her own teenage life again.

June, 2013

The Wenham Canal is glass. It's dusk. My son's silhouette is luminous around the edges against the setting sun. He skips a stone across the water. An unexpected, exquisite moment.

September, 2015

“MOM!! I’m biking to Patton to play basketball and then going to get pizza. BYE!” The door slams. Bike tires grind against the gravel, which is a preferable way to describe our crumbling driveway. He’ll be back in a couple of hours tired and happy -- perhaps having gotten into mischief, perhaps not. I entrust him to the community’s friendly, firm guidance, if needed while he’s out and about, as others entrust their children to me.

November, 2015

I still aspire to run a 5k. This time I’m going to train on the Wenham Canal because it’s the Wenham Canal. After a few weeks and more than a few attempts, I make it to the 5.5k mark. I’m ready for Gabe’s Run, but my right foot is screaming in protest.

March, 2016

“What do you mean your brother’s in the shower? He’s right here!” And we all run down the hallway to find the toilet tank water supply tube spraying and spewing freezing water all over the bathroom. “Stop Snapchatting this and help out! Grab towels!! Stick your finger in this tube HARD! It’s a lot of water pressure.” “MOM!! Don’t wade around in there, you’ll get electrocuted!” “Really?!! Oh No! Everyone out!!” And the apoplectic, water-spewing snake flails.

I was JUST in our basement last month AT the water main valve, but I can’t remember where it is. Water is pouring through the ceiling. Our basement and garage are flooded. I can’t think. I’m turning the valves to the baseboard heating system. I know these

aren't the right valves but I'll stand here and turn them until I think of something else to do. I know! I'll call 911!

Within minutes the fire department arrives. Within a few more after that, they've turned off the water, pumped most of it out of our basement and ensured we won't get electrocuted. Their support and expertise was amazing. On their way out, the Chief gives me a calm, assured smile, an encouraging pat on the shoulder, and I detect a hint of mischief when he says "If your neighbors ask why you didn't know where the water main valve was, they didn't hear it from me." Who'd of thought I'd finish this night feeling so calm....and laughing.

November, 2016

On this beautiful, crisp Thanksgiving morning, I grab an hour to walk the canal. I'm proactively addressing the pending feast with my in-laws in Maine by taking this 4-mile brisk walk, enjoying the sloppy dog kisses, and exchanges of "Hello", "Happy Thanksgiving" and friendly nods along the way. As a group of men jog by, they guffaw after one of them says to me "Why don't you go home and make dinner?"

September, 2017

“Thanks to everyone for coming to our first annual block party! The winner of the ‘best dish’ contest is Ben for his pulled pork.” I look around. There are 60-70 people in these three yards where we’re having the cookout. This is FUN! Next year I’m definitely going to bring out the big yard Bananagrams game. Oh wait...I did this year. Next year I’m definitely going to bribe some people to play it with me.

February, 2017

I’m sitting in my childhood home in Kentucky with family in the den. We’re a microcosm of the country, seemingly polarized by our current beliefs with some reckoning of long-term dynamics mixed in for fun. A tsunami of anger forms and crashes around inside of me. And for a second metaphor -- It feels like the rides I used to take on The Racer at Kings Island in Cincinnati—sitting backwards on a rickety wooden coaster, hanging on and banging around, never sure how it’d end. I’m not sure how this wild ride of anger will end, but it’s not lookin’ good.

Then I recall what I learned at the Center for Mindfulness and Insight Meditation (CMIM) – give your feelings time, give yourself time to observe and understand them. This, in turn, may allow you to thoughtfully respond, instead of immediately react fueled by unfiltered emotion. I took one 9-week class at CMIM and am hardly a mindfulness practitioner. In this moment, though, I remember and apply these lessons. The issues I reacted to with anger sitting in that den in Kentucky aren’t resolved; nor have they hijacked my emotions or relationships, thanks, in part, to what I learned at CMIM.

August, 2017

The canal is low enough that Judi and I can walk to the bridge and back on the right side. The sun shines – the glare hurts my eyes, but I welcome the penetrating warmth which feels restorative, yet any hotter would tip into discomfort. Judi prances, runs, darts after a grasshopper, prances again, then zooms into the reeds in the false hope she can catch a red-winged blackbird. Her burst sets off a cascade of flights—the geese, the herons, and all those other birds that I don't know what they are. This dog is so happy it's infectious. I should learn more about birds. I don't think I'm motivated enough to learn more about birds.

January, 2018

It's the second or fourth Tuesday of the month. Whether I'm walking into Honeycomb or Henderson's this week, I'm anticipating the warm embrace of Jen's ebullient grin and Mary's kind wisdom.

February, 2018

I'm not a runner. I'm definitely a walker, and I could start swimming. I'm going to check Gordon's pool schedule.

Written and Submitted by Carrie Jelsma

Note: Timeline rearranged and/or condensed for some scenes, and some names changed.

“Ready for Wenham” by Barrie Levine

When I moved here in 2003, I wasn't quite ready for Wenham.

My husband Paul and I downsized to our ranch house on Essex Street, across from the main entrance to Penguin Hall, from our family homestead in Essex. On the same day that we passed papers, he turned on the ignition to his Kubota farm tractor and began to reshape the landscape, clear overgrown brush, take down trees to establish a vegetable garden, plant lilacs and hedges.

He unearthed boulders with his backhoe and created an impressive burn pit in the far corner of the property. During our first spring here, we delighted in the unexpected emergence of the many beautiful perennials tended by Mrs. Wurzel, the previous owner.

We both worked out of town. Paul “commuted” the four miles each way to his hairdressing salon in Beverly Farms. I drove six miles to my law office in Salem.

Our daughter Julianne at Brandeis, our son Max in rabbinical school, we had no children attending Wenham schools.

Our house was on the edge of town, near Gordon College on Route 22, a stretch of open road between Essex and Beverly, not a street in a cohesive neighborhood.

We didn't have a pet, so we didn't meet other dog-walking residents along the Wenham Canal. Our synagogue was in Gloucester, our circle of friends back in Essex.

Wenham was a home base to return to, but not our community.

Yet, we had enjoyed some special experiences here, as do many North Shore residents. When my daughter was young, we dressed up for the important growing-up ritual of mother-daughter tea and tiny cakes at the Wenham Teahouse. Or, we spent a Saturday morning at least once a year at the Wenham Museum, drawn in by the imaginative world of elaborately dressed Victorian dolls.

When my husband became ill early in 2012, my life became centered around full-time caregiving for him at home. When he died, sadly, at the end of 2013, I sought comfort in my family, making frequent trips to our daughter in New York City, visiting my cousins up and down the East Coast, and staying for a month with our son Max and his family in Israel.

Paul and I had been married for forty-one blessed years. I felt adrift in the deepest sense of the word, and it wouldn't have mattered where I lived. My first ten years in Wenham seemed like a journey from hope to sadness.

I woke up to the reality of change in my life by surveying the yard in the early spring of 2014 — my one level acre of Wenham earth, lawn, pine trees and oaks, blossoming lilacs, ancient stone border walls, and the neglected vegetable garden that my husband had roto-tilled and carefully planted in the past until he was no longer able.

Although I faced my new life alone, I felt strengthened and supported by the peace and healing effect of this beautiful natural setting that had given both of us so much pleasure. I began to find the courage to step into the life of the community that surrounded me.

Being a senior citizen, I am part of a ready-made affinity group — my peers on either side of my decade, on either side of town — with much in common. At first I took baby steps, seeking healing from loss at my own pace. I began chair yoga classes at the senior center (WCOA), the beginning of the process of meeting people one-on-one, one-by-one.

Jim Reynolds and his friendly assistant Kathy welcomed me warmly, just when I needed it most. In the summer, fresh garden vegetables for the taking filled planters at the entrance, a generous offering that reflects the true spirit of this place.

It felt safe to open my heart again.

I applied to the senior property tax write-off program and received an assignment in the town clerk's office. As part of my new role in municipal government, I attended the Citizens' Leadership Academy, learning from employees and volunteers about each and every town service, board, and department, even participating in a mock town meeting. I gained full confidence in and immense respect for everyone I met who makes Wenham a safe and neighborly place for all generations and walks of life. And, I want to give a shoutout to the crew on the federal side at the post office who know us by name and serve our town well.

Jim knows I enjoy writing and asked me to do a column for “The Wenhamite,” our monthly senior citizens newsletter. This opportunity to “speak” to Wenham seniors and get to know them — such interesting people with incredible life experience, talent, insight, values, and compassionate outlook — is a privilege that enriches this time in my life.

I am just beginning to appreciate how much I can thrive here.

It took a journey with a tentative start in 2003, then veered off in a direction that upended all of my life’s expectations. Finally, I can say with conviction — and gratitude — that Wenham is truly my home.

(851 Words)

“It was about 3 inches by 5 inches...” by Tom Spofford

It was about 3 inches by 5 inches but for a boy growing up in a small town named Wenham it was as big as the world.

This brown card was granted to me probably about the time I could write down my own name. It was an exciting day when the librarian, Miss Duffy perhaps, slipped that library card across that high counter and into my hands. I'd watched my older siblings carting books home from some mysterious place and now I could do the same.

I was in the club!

Since that day was over fifty years ago now, I don't recall what I first checked out but I'm sure it was a nice little stack of books. My mom was a big reader and was a great influence to all of us in the family. She surely coaxed me to take out anything I wanted that day.

I can still remember, year after year, walking into the library through the foyer with it's display case. One year we got a call at home on a saturday morning asking whether I was going to get the display case finished. I had forgotten about signing up to set it up for that month. My mom raced down Larch Row with me and we got it done together. I think it was themed Birds of The North Shore and it turned out quite well. I still do my best work under pressure.

Once inside the library there was the librarian's area straight ahead and to the left, study tables, short shelves and wall shelves. To the right were the stacks, more study tables, some comfy chairs for adults, a magazine area and LP records. It was a very small library compared to most but what it had was perfectly fine for a book-hungry kid.

The librarians had special date stamps that fastened onto the ends of pencils. They would ink them up and stamp the book card and your library card with the due date which I think was two weeks.

Fines were imposed for late returns and of course our family of 8 had a few over the years. We had a window sill in our den where we stacked books ready to return. I'm not sure how my mom juggled most everything around raising six children including getting books back in time. Maybe we packed into the station wagon once a week and headed downtown for another night at the library.

It would be fun to be able to look back at some records to see how many books I took home over the years. I checked out books for school reports, read the entire Matt Christopher youth sports series and took home quite a few record albums that weren't in the best condition but I enjoyed them anyhow. The Wenham library was a treasure for me and I have used public libraries ever since.

Across the parking lot from the library was Burnham Hall where each tuesday night during my fifth and sixth grade years I put on a coat and tie and was dropped off at ballroom dancing school.

For years, Mr and Mrs Warburg taught young Wenhamites to do the foxtrot, waltz, cha cha and more. We'd be instructed to pair off. Most of the time boys asking girls to be their dance partner but once in a while there was a switch of these traditional roles. The girls and boys who were "couples" at grade school peeled off quickly to the dance floor. Other brave boys would pick a girl which usually left me and one or two girls depending on if someone was sick that week. It was almost always the same girls and so eventually

I was more comfortable dancing with them. Once in a while we were instructed to change partners mid-lesson which really threw a monkey wrench into the process. The Warburgs would demonstrate the dance steps and then watch over the kids as they stepped on each other's feet with Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head on the record player.

At the end of each lesson we would have some type of dance contest, such as dancing musical chairs, with the prize being a gift certificate to go over the town line and have a milkshake at the Hamilton Pharmacy.

After the lesson which seemed to last hours but was maybe an hour and a half, we would all head out to wait to be picked up. The "couples" would go to a dark stairway on the back side of the library and kiss until the cars started pulling up.

Credit goes to my mom who sent all six of us over the years. She was very slyly exposing us to some basic etiquette that would serve us well throughout our lives. I actually liked dancing school even though none of my school buddies attended and my shyness was being tested. Unlike Little League or Boy Scouts which were both very competitive and youthful, dancing school was for me, a glimpse into the grownup's world for ninety minutes.

When school finally let out for the summer there was 'Playground', a morning program on a small lot behind the Tea House. Weekdays from 9-noon there were all sorts of fun things to do for youngsters from simply playing in a sandbox to learning to serve in tennis. A few adults were in charge and high school kids were the counselors.

The best part was that it was all outdoors.

The sandbox was close to the entrance and there were toys scattered through it. Big picnic tables were lined up by a stone wall where leather crafts were taught. There were notebooks with examples of things like coin purses, coasters and lanyards. You'd pick something and be given what was called gimp. You'd sit somewhere and weave the gimp, a plastic coated flat string, through holes punched in the leather. With your name on the back you'd pass in your project and get it back the next day with a critique of spots where you got the gimp twisted or forgot a hole.

Beyond that area were swingsets and painting easels. Parents donated old shirts to be worn as smocks and the young artists would be given a brush, small jars of paint and a blank sheet of paper. The artworks hung to dry overnight in the storage shed destined for refrigerator doors all across the town.

A beanbag game was perilously close to the painters and surely a few accidents happened.

There was a tall slide, monkey bars and a merry go round. Through some trees there was another table for yarn and weaving crafts.

Down a hill was a field where softball, kickball and capture the flag games could be played and a quick walk through some woods brought you to the tennis courts where you could get lessons and eventually face off in a summer's end tournament.

As I got older I was allowed to ride my bike to the playground. On the ride home I stopped at Chadders Market and for about 50 cents I had my favorite summer treat, an Italian Ice.

I graduated from painting sailboats and playing kickball to being a counselor which meant setting up, breaking down and still playing a lot of kickball. I was also the go to guy for pushing the merry go round.

Looking back I feel fortunate to have grown up in Wenham. We were close to the bigger towns to go to a mall and a short drive or train ride into Boston to see the Red Sox or go to a museum. But back in Wenham we could enjoy the small town benefits of neighborhood friendships, skating on ponds and bike riding everywhere.

So many people come together to create a town and a lot of them are the townspeople. From librarians and clergy to Scout leaders and bus drivers, they all serve the citizens young and old.

The teachers and police, school cooks and firemen, snowplow operators and swim teachers along with so many others, paid or volunteer, who kept and still keep the town active and functioning deserve our thanks. Many work quietly in the background, on committees or at desks in the town hall, patching potholes in the street or at the voting booths while others risk their lives going into burning buildings, climbing ladders to repair a steeple or rushing to a car accident. There are librarians or shopkeepers who smile at you every time you walk in, a couple who year after year teach the foxtrot or maybe the piano and a kind person at a summer playground or after school program who tells a child his painting is perfect. The efforts of every single one of these people has for 375 years added up to shape the sweet town of Wenham which will always be my hometown.

375th
Town of Wenham
Anniversary Celebration
1643-2018

Special thanks to the Writing Contest Judges:

Bob Hickey
Bob Hicks
Patricia Purdy
Diane Stinson

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Join us on Saturday, September 8
for the
Wenham 375th Parade and Community Day!