

THE SUTTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SUTTON, MASSACHUSETTS



— BULLETIN —

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John

By Ben MacLaren

Growing up on a Sutton farm during the 1930s and 1940s, I was not always aware of the hardships suffered by those around me. A class of people, ever present but unnoticed, was the hired man. Most working farms had one. He was without special skills, always a helper, never in charge of, or responsible for, anything.

He was not skilled as was Earl Pearson at Whittier's Farm, or Lawrnie Briggs at Arthur King's Farm, or George Partridge at Perry Bros. Dairy. These were herdsman, teamsters, and equipment operators who could tell you which grass best served which situation and grew best in which soil. They could heal a sick or injured animal and knew how to read the weather. They could patch up the Ford Ferguson or get one more season out of the New Idea manure spreader.

Frank Baker looked like a hired man, smelled like a hired man, and lived in a hired man's shack, but he wasn't a hired man. Frank "hired out." He worked for anyone who had a need as long as it was not for too long. When I knew him, he lived in a shack near the farmhouse now owned by Pauline Shaw on Central Turnpike in West Sutton. Among his many talents was a knowledge of animal medicine, using herbs and other roots and plants that he gathered in the area woods. These were dried and ground into a powder for poultices for use on barbed wire cuts, boils, and swollen legs. In the case of severe colic, the powder was made into a liquid and poured into an animal's throat. Just about every farm was equipped with the same one quart green wine bottle. It had thick glass and was dented in at the bottom. The long thin neck went way down into the animal's throat

leaving him no choice but to swallow the medicine. Frank always looked as though he was letting you in on something when he told you that the secret was passed to him by a Chippewa Medicine Man from North Dakota. I, for one, believed that.

It was also rumored that during prohibition a Frank Baker poultice — properly aged for two months in a five gallon pickle crock of water with chicken mash and raisins — could limber up the dance step of almost any deacon if taken internally for a real or imaged ailment.



MILESTONE FARM

Our farm was Milestone Farm on what was then West Sutton Road. It is now Boston Road. The boss was my grandfather, Fred L. Batcheller.

There were several hired men over the years, but the last was John Grenier. I have no idea where he came from or where he went after our barn burned in 1942. John, like most hired men, was without identity much as was a hinge on the grain bin lid. You could get along without one, but it was harder. Each — the hired man and the hinge — served a purpose for which each was uniquely qualified.

John was a "Kanook." His origin was somewhere in the Quebec Province of Canada, but no one knew

for sure. I never heard him speak English. He and my grandfather made their needs known with flopping hands and a mixture of words which made sense only to them. No one, including John, seemed to care. John's was a solitary, sparse life. He had long since been discarded by any family he might have had.

Hired men often lived in small one-room shacks located near the barn. None had electricity. All were dirty. They had a door and maybe one window for ventilation. The smell of stale cow manure was overpowering to any but the resident.

At Milestone Farm there was no shack. My grandfather's hired man lived upstairs in the house in a small bedroom. He disapproved of the shacks, citing cases of hired men freezing to death during the night or burning to death when the wood stove malfunctioned or the kerosene lantern tipped over while the hired man slept.

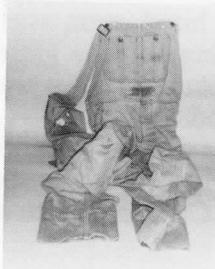
Living in the house did little to alter John's habits of cleanliness. My mother, "Ma," was always at odds with him about keeping clean. He would wash his hands and face at the black iron sink in the back kitchen after evening chores, but not much more.



WASH TUB

John wore bib overalls in layers, which he added to or subtracted from as the weather changed. At the bottom of the layers was a pair of soiled and stained white long john underwear with a buttoned trapdoor in the rear. I knew about the long johns because one night I unintentionally walked in on the only bath John took — to my knowledge — in the four years, more or less, that he worked at Milestone Farm. Seldom did anyone go into the barn after supper. But Limpy Cat, our three-legged cat, had had kittens, so I went out to play with them.

A single cold water faucet supplied all of the water needs in the barn. John was standing at the faucet in a big galvanized wash tub which was used for mixing grain with waste milk for the chickens. He had bought a new pair of overalls which, of course,



OVERALLS-
TOP LAYER

became the bottom layer next to the long johns. The logic must have been that, being nearly nude anyway, he may as well take a bath.

He was half-way up to his knees in cold water, still in his buttoned long johns, washing both himself and the underwear with the strong yellow soap powder my grandfather used to wash the milk pails. This stuff was so strong that it made your hands look like prunes after five minutes of milk pail washing.

I retreated unnoticed into the house. Without my brother along I was afraid of John. I don't know why. He was a gentle person who spent hours sitting with Limpy Cat in his lap talking to her in "Kanook" — probably about how it was as a boy in Canada or about how hard it must be to climb a tree with only three legs. I was never at ease with John. He was different.

A short time later he came into the house with his layers of dirty overalls back on. Only I knew that under it all was wet, but cleaner, long john underwear that would dry in place as he slept. The soap powder residue must have made him itch.

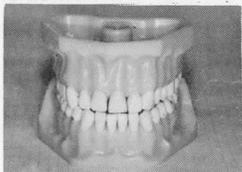
There was no toilet in the house until about 1940. The family used a "three-holer" in the barn. It was no ordinary toilet even though its days of elegance had long since passed. Time, flies, and spiders had taken their toll. It had three, rather than two, holes, in three sizes to accommodate different sized bottoms. Each hole had its own cover with hinges and fancy beveled edges. The lime pail sat in its own compartment with a matching cover. Years before my grandmother had wallpapered the pail with big red roses on a tan background.

The Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs were recycled there. When the catalogs moved from the house to the outhouse, my grandfather tore out and threw away the women's underwear ad pages to protect my brother and me from temptation. We prized any of the pages we got to before he did and nailed them to the walls in our club house. I was younger than Ed and our friend Roland Young. I was not sure what we were looking for, but I nodded and smiled a lot because I didn't want to be left out of whatever it was that Ed and Roland were nodding and smiling about. Maybe it was because the girls in the pictures didn't have belly buttons. Even then I knew girls were supposed to have belly buttons.

A fresh catalog was a welcomed treat since some of the pages were better suited for toilet use than others. We avoided the shiny ones until there were no others to chose from.

To everyone's relief, John refused to share these facilities for reasons known only to himself. He used his own remote corner of the barn except at night. I still have the old crockery "thunder jug" that he used at night and stored under his bed until morning. He was awake and downstairs by 3:30 A.M. for coffee with my grandfather and then into the barn at 4:00 A.M. to

start chores. Every morning John brought his thunder jug with him to empty. This didn't create a problem except after the occasional very cold night when the contents froze. John would leave it by the black iron stove to thaw while he drank his coffee. There was no retreat from the smell that seeped into every corner of the house. Ma finally gave up trying to change the procedure since only two or three nights a year were that cold. It was as much a part of John as were his store teeth.



STORE TEETH

John was proud of his store teeth. They were really his only treasured possession. One morning he was hoeing manure from behind the cows, down the scuttle, and into the pile in the barn cellar. He sneezed. Out flew his teeth. They had always clacked from fitting loosely in his mouth. And now they were gone — vanished!! Despite a search, which extended into the manure pile under the barn, poor John couldn't find his teeth. This was around Christmas time, so everyone felt especially sorry for him. John was more than a little suspicious that my brother Ed and I were some how involved, but we were "clean" this time. Ma had assured us that if we were not as innocent as we professed we would see the business end of a yard stick. I began to believe that my brother was not telling all he knew. After all, someone *must* have had John's teeth! Recently, while watching the Judge Clarence Thomas hearings, I was reminded of the apparent guilt that oozed over everyone involved.

All winter John kept a watchful eye to no avail. Then, in the spring, there was a particularly warm day requiring John to remove the top layer of his overalls. As he pulled them off and shook the winter's accumulation of sawdust and manure from the rolled up cuffs in preparation for summer storage, the long missing teeth fell to the floor amidst the sawdust and manure. One of the few displays of emotion I remember from John was the happy smile that sprang to his face. He snatched up the teeth, wiped them "clean" on his now top layer of overalls, and popped them into his mouth, no worse for the wear despite three months of cuff life.

When John came to Milestone Farm, everything he owned he either wore, carried in a battered suitcase with no handle and tied shut with a rope, or stored in a small wooden box about twice the size of a cigar box. This box was quite nice with little brass hinges and a lock. John had misplaced the key. The box was stored in a burlap grain bag under his bed behind his thunder jug.



CHEST AND CONTENTS

One day curiosity overcame me. I sneaked into his room and opened the box of the symbols of John's life. There was a pocket watch that didn't appear to work. If it did, I don't believe John could tell time anyway. There was a worn and tattered cardboard box his teeth had come in, a little cash, some used safety pins, a brand new red handkerchief, a needle, and several spools of black thread. I think that was all.

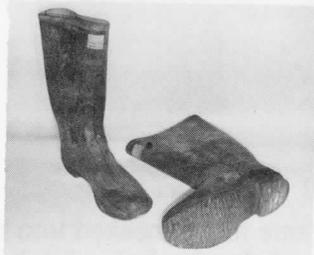
John was paid \$24 per month in cash plus "keep." My grandfather called it "found." He kept the cash in his wooden box. One other benefit of employment furnished by my grandfather was knee-high black rubber boots. These were often speared with a dung fork or otherwise cut. They invariably had a network of red patches, the same patches used on car tire tubes. Properly applied they extended the life of a pair of boots to a year or more. Only a hole worn through the bottom made replacement necessary. My grandfather was a fair man. He and John wore the same size boots. A lesser man would have taken the new boots and passed down his old ones, but not Fred L. Batcheller.

John had his turn at new boots and a trip to Worcester with Ma to buy them. This was a big event in his existence. Ma bought them at the Harding Supply Company on Water Street in Worcester. The boots were two pairs for \$5.00 or one pair for \$2.65. I never knew her to buy two pairs despite the savings. The extra \$2.35 was hard to come by during the depression of the 1930s.

Ma paid for the boots with the money she received for the empty burlap grain bags that she sold at The Atlantic Bag Company, the bag and rag dealer, further up on Water Street. The sign said ten cents per bag, but some how there was a flaw in each bag that reduced the price down to as low as two cents. I never remember her getting ten cents a bag despite the sign.

Every farmer saved and sold the empty bags. Most also saved the string that sealed the tops of the grain bags. As it was zipped off, the string was tied to the end of a string ball. I just recently tied a package with the last of my grandfather's grain bag string balls from forty or more years ago. It was like the passing of an era and got me thinking about that fine old man and his hired man, John. From there my thoughts went to John's teeth and to his dress shoes

that had two different colored soles because he only replaced the sole that had a hole. Then my thoughts went to Water Street and then to John's boots, and on.



JOHN'S BOOTS

The Harding Supply Company was an imposing name for a very unimposing little shop that sold almost everything imaginable. It was John's favorite of all places to be. Ma left him there to shop while she took the bags to be sold. Beside his boots, which Ma paid for, he bought his other necessities there. He took \$5.00, exactly, from his wooden box. He had long since learned that if he selected \$5.05 or \$5.06 worth of goods the little old Jewish shop owner would call it even. If it got to \$5.10, John had to put something back to adjust the price to \$5.00 even.

John bought Red Plug chewing tobacco at six for a dollar, two dollars worth, woolen socks, some vile smelling stuff to hold his teeth in place, and other odds and ends. The final purchase was always a large bag of hard candy. Ma drew the line at chewing tobacco in the house, so John substituted the little root beer barrel candies that were in a large tin and sold by the handful. It was these candies that were calculated to bring the bill up to, and just over, \$5.00. The shop owner was kind to John, but his dirty hands in the root beer barrel candy tin must have tried the owner's patience.

Every Sunday was John's day off. Six days a week he was in the barn from 4:00 A.M. working through until 6:30 P.M. On Sunday he helped with the barn chores morning and night, 4:00 A.M. to 6:30 A.M. and 4:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M., a scant five hours. The rest of the day was his to lay around, hang out, or do whatever he chose. Occasionally he went to Worcester to visit a relative. Ma would drive him to Bramanville to take the electric trolley. My grandfather always invited him to attend church with the family.

I am sure that John had no idea what a Congregationalist was, let alone want to be one on his day off.

In December 1942, the barn at Milestone Farm burned to the ground. The only animals to survive were Old Limpy Cat and one kitten. It was a cold, rainy, and dismal day.

The last I ever saw of John was that morning. He was sitting all hunched over on the stone wall opposite the house with his small wooden box clutched in his arms and his suitcase on the wall beside him. He watched as his world burned. The light from the fire reflected off the tears from his usually expressionless eyes. I remember noticing that the buttons of his old mackinaw jacket were in the wrong holes.

I assume that my grandfather knew where John went, but I never did. It didn't occur to me to ask. I wish that I had. Like Silas in Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of the Hired Man," John was probably less than welcome wherever it might have been.

There was no pride for past accomplishments or hope for a future harvest or a better milk check from Salmonson's Dairy. These were my grandfather's rewards. Deacon Fred L. Batcheller left a mark and people remember who he was and miss him. John Grenier is forgotten even though he and my grandfather milked the same cows, hoed the same manure, and wore the same size boots.

There are no more hired men as we then knew them. Society has advanced somehow while leaving them behind. It seems that they were always older, a little slow; they had left the hard times in Canada, or elsewhere, for whatever promise might have been here. Most came without a past and went somewhere to die when they could no longer do the mundane chores of others. If they died here in Sutton, they were buried in the pauper's cemetery on Town Farm Road. George Pigeon, 1872 to 1942, and John Baker, 1872 to 1955, are two among the several hired men there.

They were indispensable on the farm, but easily replaced during the depression of the 1930s. Like the hinge on the grain bin lid, they served their purpose until, in fact, the bin and the grain burned. Then there was no need.

For Sale

"Sutton Documents" (1681 and 1720-1778)

This 44-page booklet contains reproductions of 26 original documents and their exact translations. The documents include indentures, bonds, notes and deeds, military orders, petitions, power-of-attorney, and miscellany. Fully cross-indexed.

Revised Edition • \$7.00 pp

Mail check to the Sutton Historical Society, 4 Uxbridge Rd., Sutton, MA 01590.

A Rare Historical Relic for our Museum

A Rare Historical Relic

From the estate of the late Robert and Mildred Pierce, residents of Sutton for many years, the Society has received the transit which was used in the boundary line survey between Sutton and Millbury in 1831-32. Millbury was set off from Sutton in 1813, but the town lines were not run until nineteen years later. The brass cover of the compass is engraved in script with *H. Pierce, 1827*. (Deacon) Harvey Pierce was a lineal ancestor of Robert Pierce.

The transit or "circumferentor," which preceded the telescope type, is a circular box that contains a precision compass divided into 360 divisions of 1°. The compass compartment is mounted on a 12" brass bar having 7 1/2" uprights at each end which have a narrow vertical slot to align a target with the

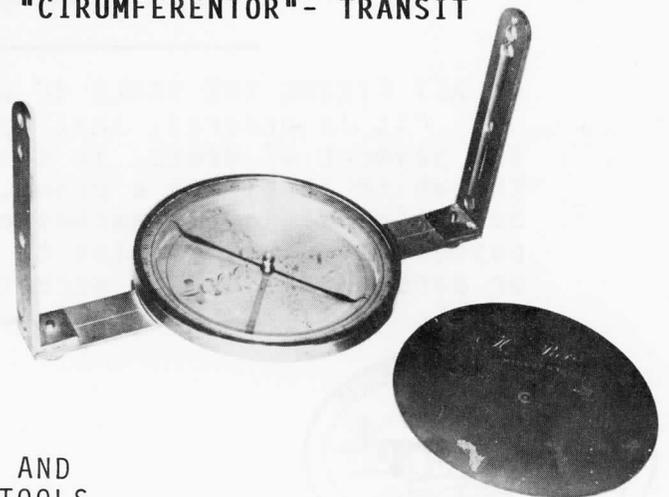
compass for a direction point readout. The transit was made by T. Kendall of New Lebanon, NY, and probably purchased from J.H. Temple, 31 Court Street, Boston, who made the wooden instrument box.

Other surveyor's tools were included with the gift: a parallel rule, square, protractor, and dividers. The field book inscribed with the signature of Harvey Pierce on the flyleaf is historically important for documentation purposes. The first page of the field book reads, "Minutes taken on the survey of the Town of Millbury in the year 1830-31."

The society is grateful to George and Mildred Pierce for their donation to our museum as a milestone in recording separation in the original area of Sutton into neighboring townships.

*Minutes taken on the survey
of the Town of Millbury in
the years 1830 & 1831
Beginning at a stone monument
a corner of Sutton Millbury and*

"CIRUMFERENTOR"- TRANSIT



FIELD CASE
FOR TRANSIT AND
DRAFTING TOOLS



*Harvey Pierce's
Field Book
Millbury 1831
H. Pierce
3*

MONTHLY MEETINGS-

DECEMBER 3, 1991 - This meeting was postponed until December 17, 1991 due to inclement weather. The Society met at the Rufus Putnam Hall for the Annual Christmas auction. Usually a larger than normal attendance is present at these auctions due to an anticipation of finding a bargain. However, postponement and seasonal activities limited the group to seventeen persons but it did not diminish the enthusiasm in spirited bidding on two pieces. A total of \$173 was raised. Refreshments were served.

JANUARY 7, 1992 - The Society met at the General Rufus Putnam Hall. Interest in the announced program resulted in a record attendance. Dr. Hannah J. MacMillan, whose avocation is in collecting quilts and the craftsmanship of quilting organized a vast display of quilts in the DAR Hall. A geometric kaleidoscopic roomscape covered all available space in the hall...four walls, tables, tie rods across the ceiling and draped over showcases. Members and guests added their own quilts to amplify the impressive display. Dr. MacMillan commented on specific styles, dating and the technics of designs. Refreshments were served.

FEBRUARY 4 - The meeting was postponed due to weather conditions. The scheduled program, "If Walls Could Talk", a discussion and slide presentation by Nora Pat Small in identifying specific items of construction in early buildings to help in estimating their age. This program will be presented at the March 3rd meeting.

IN MEMORIAM-

* George Gillespie *

AN ACT FIXING THE VAULE OF WAMPAMPEAG. (Wampum)

"It is ordered; that wampampeag shall pass current in the payment of debts, to the payment of forty shillings, the white at eighty a penny, the black at four, so as they be entire without breaches or deforming spots, except in payment of country rates to the treasurer, which no town or person may do, nor accept thereof, from time to time".

ye yr 1643



General Rufus Putnam Hall
4 Uxbridge Road, Sutton, MA 01590

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