

Colebrook River – Another Saga

Even as the years roll on, new stories about the village of Colebrook River keep popping up. In early November, 2011, I received an inquiry from a retired engineer who had worked on both realignments of CT Rt. 8 through the valley of the West Branch of the Farmington River back in the 1950s and 60s. His initial contact mentioned that while working there in 1953, he had come across a set of 1916 Connecticut auto license plates at the location of one of the buildings being torn down. As they were in excellent condition, he picked them up and has had them ever since. Now downsizing, he wondered if perhaps the historical society might be interested in having them, otherwise he would sell them on E-bay. He wondered whether or not these might have been among the oldest plates issued for a Colebrook River inhabitant.

In my reply to him I included a portion of the text of Amy Baxter's memoir about The River, which read in part: "Not long after the turn of the century, autos began to appear on the roads. Two brothers, Charles and Albert Slater were in the lumber business, and I believe were the first in The River to purchase cars. Charles bought a Steamer. I really think his interest and enjoyment were entirely in what made it go. I do not know what make Albert's was, but I do know it was a curiosity. The door was at the back; a few steps to walk up, and there you were. Albert and his wife invited us for a Sunday afternoon ride. There were few, if any state roads in our section of the state; ours were gravel roads full of bumps and holes. Tires and springs were not as of today either. We had a grand ride, though we stopped once or twice to see if the engine was still with us. We arrived safely home, and as we climbed down the back steps of the car, my husband said: "I'm sure going to have one of those things!""

In a subsequent message I wrote: "Something of interest for you: The alignment that was chosen for CT Rt.8 was not the one approved by the committee charged with determining which of three routes was to be the one passing the reservoir and then proceeding north through Massachusetts to connect with the Mass. Pike at Becket.

At the time these proceedings were taking place, I was the information editor for Hammond, Inc., a major mapping company located in Maplewood, N.J., and one of my projects was to monitor all highway additions and realignments in the U.S. I mentioned that there were three proposed alignments: Plan "A" was to go up the east side of the Farmington River, plan "B" was the one you see today, plan "C" was to proceed up the valley on the west side along the crest of the surrounding hills. All were to converge on Becket at I-90.

Plan "C" would have gone right past our family farm, which would have ruined the place, hence was of great concern to us. I told my folks when the final decision was made (I believe 75% of the funding was Federal monies, and thus had to be approved by congress) that they no longer had anything to worry about; the final choice had been made, and it was plan "A", on the un-populated eastern highlands.

All of my protestations that this was the wrong alignment fell on deaf ears; for my father, seeing was believing, and my set of blueprints were trumped by the blasting going on down in the valley.

Eventually Connecticut finished her portion of Rt.8, where it ended at a wall of rock covered by a mature forest. Then and only then did the DOT officials from the two states meet to find out what was going on. Mass. said they weren't about to start, because they wanted to be able to get paid when they were done, something that wasn't going to happen with the wrong alignment. There were hearings held in both Hartford and in Washington, where it was determined that no illegal intent could be found, it was just a bone-head mistake on the part of Conn. officials. The original plan was negated, plan "B" was substituted in its place, and Mass. began to work their section.

To my knowledge, this story never made the news at any level, and over the years I began to have self doubts as to my remembrance of the facts. Then, about 18 years ago, I happened to mention to my neighbor, Laurel Saramak, that she had almost had a major highway going past her doorstep up in the quietude of Beech Hill. She almost floored me with: "I know, my Dad, John DiMeo, was an engineer on that project, and he always told that story, but had never been able to meet with anyone who also knew about it." She arranged a meeting for me with her father, and we had a good remembering session; each of us was greatly relieved that our memories had not played tricks on us.

Peer replied that he remembered John DiMeo, and it was interesting to hear his name again. He went on to say that he worked on the project in 1953 as a young construction survey rodman just out of high school as summer help before going down to LSU to study Engineering. He recalled hanging off the rock cuts measuring the amount of rock to be removed before the blasting. "We shared the steep ledge with the wagon drillers. A rough, dusty lot. One called me over to show me a finger cut off of a driller the day before.

I did hear talk about the fact that there was no conversation between the State and the Feds and someone should have known about the second dam to be built.

I loved working in Colebrook because of the rugged countryside. It made me feel like I was doing mountain surveying out West. I remember walking the roads of Colebrook River and with the buildings standing or partly torn down thinking I was in a war zone. Then there were the people moving the cemetery and not being allowed to leave the work site.

So the Colebrook River area has a lot of memories for me. Good times. Great creamery in Torrington as a stop on our way back to headquarters in New Milford.

I am coming down to Litchfield [from New Hampshire] in the spring for my wife's family reunion and might drive up to deliver the plates. Maybe identify the location where they were found. With that and the plate number (40828) we might be able to say who they belonged to."

I'm looking forward to meeting with Peer next spring, reminiscing about The River and putting on display another small bit of Colebrook history.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg