

## Memories of Beech Hill (Sarah Stillman Ransom, Born 1873)

Sarah, daughter of Ensign and Justine Doolittle Stillman and granddaughter of James and Philecta Stillman, married Edward Ransom of West Hartland. She was interviewed by Henry Hart Vining in the 1950s, and is republished here.

“My grandparents, Mr. & Mrs. James Stillman, lived in the house near and just north of Mr. & Mrs. Henry Granger. [It was the first house south of the Massachusetts border on the west side of present day Simons Pond Road.] They had four children, two sons, Ensign and Rhierson; two daughters, Emerett and Abbie.”

“Grandpa was a dairy farmer, kept about six cows, made butter and cheese. The cheese they sold to their customers for 14¢ per pound. Sage cheese sold for 16¢ per pound. The butter they took to the variety store in Winsted in exchange for groceries. Grandpa hired a man to help him during the busy season from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April to the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. He raised about fifty bushels of potatoes. This was his only crop. He made maple syrup and sugar in the spring and exchanged some of it at the store for granulated sugar.”

“Their oldest son, Ensign, (my father) married Justine Doolittle of Pleasant Valley, who, at the age of forty, with her daughter, Mrs. Ida French, aged eighteen, were drowned in Simons Pond.

Rhierson, the youngest son, married Ida Hitchcock of Colebrook. He was a soldier in the Civil War for three years. For several years before his death he was a photographer in Jamestown, New York.”

“My grandparents’ two daughters, Emerett, fifteen years and Abby, aged thirteen, were stricken with typhoid fever and died within a week of each other.

Mr. Stillman represented the Town of Colebrook in the Legislature in 1885. He died the following spring of pneumonia, aged 72 years. Grandma Stillman died ten years later, aged 82. Both are buried in the North Colebrook cemetery.”

“Mr. & Mrs. Henry Granger, next-door neighbors to my grandparents, lived a retired life on their big farm, only keeping two cows for their own use. He lost his daughter (and only child by a former wife), Lucy, who was married to Clifford Hitchcock and was survived by a little son, Homer, two weeks old. Lucy was 29 years of age.

The house, one-half mile south from the Grangers, was called the ‘Old Spencer Place’, and was always spoken of as the ‘haunted house’. It was said people riding by claimed they had seen the house lighted up by spells and that they heard strange noises from within. It was empty for a good many years, when it fell to pieces.”

“The next house, about one-fourth mile beyond, was where John and Augusta Smith lived. They took care of his mother, Mrs. Abigail Smith, 92 years of age and stone deaf. They had a sheep farm. They kept four cows and sold some butter. Mrs. John Smith used to have a loom and wove rag carpets and rugs, also spun her own yarn. She knit all their own socks and mittens and sometimes boarded the ‘school marms’ in the district. They all passed away from natural causes and no one lived there afterwards, and the house was eventually burned by arson.”

“In the next house at the foot of the hill from the Smiths, lived Mr. & Mrs. Abraham Moses. They had three sons, Lyman, Stanton and Eddie. Lyman married Lois Thompson; Stanton, a Hartford girl and Eddie married Millie Clark. Millie Moses also

wove rag carpets. Eddie kept a horse, a few cows, chickens and ducks. He had a cider press and made cider for the farmers in the vicinity who brought their cider apples to his mill. All are dead now and the house was eventually burned (also arson).

There was another house just before you came to the Beech Hill Schoolhouse that was called the old 'plastered house'. The outside was plastered as well as the inside. The last family who lived there was Curtis Oles and five children. Three attended school. This was about 60 years ago." [1890s]

"The schoolhouse came next. This school, as well as I can remember, had twelve desks for the pupils; six for the girls and six for the boys, and two long benches. There was the teacher's desk and a big, long box stove that held large chunks of wood. I attended school there for five years, while I lived with my grandparents. Some of the scholars who attended were Dennis Chapin's six children and five from James O'Neil's. Mr. & Mrs. Krause, who lived on Cobb Street, about two miles toward North Colebrook, sent three children. There were two Joyner girls, also Mr. BeDell's daughter. Mr. Curtis Oles' children, and sometimes Julia Terrel came, and with myself, made twenty-two most of the time, but sometimes less."

"Some of the teachers who taught there before I went were David Lawton, Sarah Joyce and Hattie Killfoil. Those that taught when I went were Almira Moore, Delia Wolcott, Laura Tenney, Katherine Doyle, Katie Merriman, Katie Hayes and Polaski Bowman. Mr. Bowman was from North Colebrook and was the Visiting School Committee. [School visitors were elected officials whose duties were to visit each school at least twice a year to monitor the teacher, the progress of the students and the physical condition of the school buildings.] It was from Mr. Bowman that I received what nearly equaled a high school education. He would explain the hard problems and give us his rules so we could understand those hard examples. He was very smart and had a wonderful brain.

Sometimes when we had a big snowstorm, we were taken to school with the oxen and sled. It was seldom in those days that any of us were absent from having severe colds or absent from having too bad traveling. Two boys used to get a pail of water from the spring twice a day and another student would pass around the dipper. We never had heard of germs in those days, but finally two or three of us older girls bought a tumbler and kept it in our desks and the rest of the school twitted us for getting so 'high toned' that we couldn't drink out of the dipper any more."

"Mr. Abraham Moses and Mr. John Smith used to make pretty silver rings for some of us school girls. They were made from ten cent pieces, which they placed on the end of a small, long, steel knife sharpener, pounding a hole out of the center, then kept pounding it into shape on the outside of the ten cent piece. The charge for making one was .10¢.

Mr. & Mrs. Granger spent their winter evenings by making a great many lamp lighters from strips of newspapers rolled up very tightly. These lighters were to save matches.

The Grangers and the Stillmans used to have a sundial so as to be able to tell the time of day if their clocks stopped. By leaving the back kitchen door open one-half way, it would be 11:30 A. M. when the sun shone in even with the half way mark on the floor. I remember checking this, and it was correct."

[To be continued next week.]

## Memories of Beech Hill, Part II

“I forgot to say that in 1882, Annie M. McAlpine taught the Beech Hill School and then in the spring married my father, Ensign Stillman.

My grandmother’s meals were simple, but delicious, for she was a wonderful cook. She always used sour cream and butter for shortening. It was a case of ‘a feast or a famine’, as we never had fresh meat in the summer. I did not know the taste of beefsteak or hamburg and never heard of frankfurters.

Grandma always depended on her barrel of salt pork, her dried beef (which she had cured the winter before), codfish and a kit of salt mackerel. We never had many eggs to eat. She only kept 12 hens.”

“In those days she never cooked cereal for breakfast, but kept a little oatmeal on hand, which required two hours for cooking. For breakfast, which was at six or seven A. M., she often had crisp, fried pork and cream gravy (very lumpy); flour wasn’t stirred very smooth with the milk or cream, but we liked it that way. We also had warmed up potatoes, chopped fine.

She never made coffee. They always drank tea for dinner, which was exactly at twelve o’clock, noon. Grandma sometimes served, for meat, a big ‘hunk’ of boiled pork and dandelion, milkweed or cowslip greens with some big slices of rock turnips. She would have a steamed, Indian meal pudding with milk and cream. Maple sugar was stirred into it and a lot more maple sugar to add as a topper, or sometimes she served a cottage pudding with sauce.”

“For supper at six o’clock P. M., Grandma might serve hot biscuit, made with sour cream or buttermilk and soda instead of baking powder, which made lovely biscuits.

The cold victuals from the dinner were set out for the men folks, with maybe a custard pie. Big slices of her homemade cheese (sometimes cottage cheese) and her preserved grapes or plum sauce and piccalilli. We never heard of potato salad in those days. She often had a plain loaf of sour cream cake or sour cream cookies, sweetened with maple sugar and sometimes had citron preserves. Grandma made a great many short-cakes when berries were in season, She never knew how to make layer cake, but made raised loaf-cake, ginger bread and wonderful crullers with buttermilk; also chicken pie, pork cake in the winter and raised doughnuts. When she expected company, she would make gold and silver cakes, made from the egg whites (silver) and gold from the yokes; two separate loaves, and frost them. No other cake was ever frosted. She made the usual baked beans occasionally.”

“Grandpa’s favorite was ‘hasty pudding’ and milk, but Grandma hated to wash the dish afterwards, so he didn’t get it very often.

In the winter we fared better for meat, as they always butchered a good pig that weighed about 350 pounds and a beef cow, so we always had a barrel of corned beef. They also made about 50 pounds of lovely sausage.”

“They always had a wonderful garden and the cellar was well supplied with vegetables and apples. A few carrots were kept in reserve to give to the horse. Grandma said that some people put a few in soup, but she never cooked them. When in doubt what to cook, she made an Irish stew, with slices of salt pork, potatoes and onions (sliced) and made dumplings for the top. The last thing, she added some milk and a big lump of butter to the broth. It was very appetizing.

After the pig was butchered, she used everything except the brains and the squeal. She made 'souse', a sticky mess like glue from the ears, feet, etc. She usually baked the head, after the brains, eyes and jawbone were removed. She would have it for supper, calling it the 'minister's face'. One afternoon the minister from the North Colebrook Baptist Church called and Grandma invited him to supper and told him she had the 'minister's face' for supper. He stayed and enjoyed it very much. This minister was the Rev. William Goodwin. He was a weather prophet."

"Grandma was quite witty. One time she was eating sausage for supper and put the hot grease, fried out of the sausage, on her bread and boiled potatoes. I told her it went against my stomach to see her eat that greasy gravy. 'Humph! I love to have it go against mine,' she replied. Another time she and her mother-in-law bought a broom about the same time. Her mother-in-law said to her, 'My broom is almost as good as new'. Grandma said to her, 'So would mine be if I never used it!'

Grandpa made droll remarks also. He'd say such and such a person's eyes 'shone like a piece of cambric'. Another remark was, 'That woman is so homely, I shouldn't think victuals would taste good to her,'

Grandpa raised pears and plums. They never bought any fruit. I didn't know what an orange or banana tasted like while I lived there."

"Grandma usually had several pieces of beef (after staying in brine just so long) hanging up in the kitchen to dry and saved for use in the summer. She dipped candles or ran them into molds. One gallon of kerosene would last her a month in the winter, only using one lamp to read by in the evening, part of the time. We usually retired about nine P. M.

As near as I can recall, some of the prices of those times were: butter 18¢ to 25¢ per pound, eggs, 18¢ a dozen, sometimes a little more, potatoes 50¢ per bushel, apples \$1.00 to \$1.25 per barrel, flour was cheap, good yellow cornmeal was 75¢ per hundred pounds."

"Grandma always made soft soap in the spring. I never heard of macaroni or spaghetti in those days. We all were in good health. My grandmother weighed over 200 pounds; Grandpa, about 99 pounds or less, and my weight was 112 pounds when 12 years of age."

Grandma Stillman believed in the usual weather signs: 'Evening red and morning gray bids fair for another day,' 'Thunder in the morning, sailors take warning.' And the hens would preen and oil their feathers just before a rain. If the water boiled out of the pot, and the potatoes burned on, it was the surest sign of rain. 'Rainbow at night, sailor's delight.'

She believed in some of the superstitious signs of the old days. One funny one was that if a cat started running all around, as if in a fit, and waving her tail furiously, that the wind was going to blow hard. And it used to prove true. If she dropped her dishcloth, it was a sure sign of company. It was a bad sign to watch anyone out of sight; you would never see them again."