

Orrin Oles

Among the early inhabitants of Colebrook who left a lasting mark on the town was Orrin William Oles. Orrin was born in Otis, Mass. on May 12 1827. He spent most of his long life on Beech Hill in Colebrook, living on his farm until two or three years before he passed on in 1923. His last years were spent with his daughter-in-law, Mrs. William Oles, his son's widow, in Winsted.

The farm, or at least the house and barn/workshop still exist as 70 Beech Hill Road; the land that had been so pains-takenly wrested from Mother Nature have, for the most part, reverted to their former state. The property that Orrin farmed has been split up and sold and two new dwellings now stand on the former fields and pastures.

He was interviewed by a reporter from the *Hartford Courant* in 1921, when he was in his 94th year. Here are the highlights:

“In reply to the question ‘Do you still do any work?’ he replied: ‘I piled a cord of four-foot wood this morning before breakfast. I can mow grass, but cannot stand it very long. This is the first season that I have not mowed on my farm.’ [He is talking about scything.] His nephew, Raymond Oles, met him on the street in the forenoon of the same day. He was then on his way to have a buck saw set so that he could saw the cord of wood he piled before breakfast.” [Bucksaws had just cutting teeth, without rakers (the swallow-tailed teeth), and therefore had to have a pretty good set in order to make a curf wide enough so as not to bind.]

“Mr. Oles did not have any special training in early life, only such as comes with a life of toil for someone else. He learned to do carpentry and millwright work. When he was 24 years old he laid out and framed the first paper mill ever built in Colebrook. This was his first mill job, it was 50 by 60 feet, and considered a large mill for those days. He put in all the machinery and had it running in a satisfactory manner.”

“Mr. Oles married Miss Jerusha A. Currier of Norfolk in 1849. There were two children; neither are living. There were two grandchildren, and six great grandchildren are living. He has nine nephews and nieces.

Mr. Oles can remember when he was seven years old. He never went to school in the summer after he was eight years old. Asked who was the first president of the United States he remembered, he said: ‘I remember Martin Van Buren. The first president [candidate] I voted for was McClelland.’ [Martin Van Buren, the eighth president, served from 1837 to 1841. Gen. George McClelland ran against Lincoln when Lincoln ran for reelection in 1864 and was handily defeated.]

“Do you remember about the first railroads in the United States?” “Transportation was very crude when I was a boy. The old Housatonic road was the first I knew about. I remember my mother (she was born in 1799) telling that she rode horseback through the streets of Winsted when the mud was knee deep. There were very few railroads in the United States when the Housatonic was built.” [In 1849, the year the first railroad came to Winsted, there were 3,000 miles of track in use in the United States. The Housatonic RR was completed from Bridgeport to the Massachusetts border at Canaan in 1842.]

“Do you remember when matches were first made?” “I was 10 years old before I saw any matches.” “What did you do to light a fire?” “We had big log fireplaces and covered up the fire with ashes, but some of the time it would go out; then I would have to go to a neighbor’s to borrow a coal to build a fire. I have got up early in the morning and gone a mile to a neighbor’s and get a coal of fire so we could make a fire to get breakfast with. Sometimes we used a flint.”

“Mr. Oles has seen great changes in the country since then. He said: ‘When I was a boy they used to talk in Massachusetts about the blue laws of Connecticut, but it now looks to me as though the blue had nearly all faded out of Connecticut laws. When I was a boy the young men had to all go to church on Sunday, or they were fined. I remember young Farnham, in Colebrook. I was acquainted with him. He did not want to go to church, but in order to escape the fine, he rode his horse into the church and sat in the saddle while the service was held. In later years he was deacon of the same church.’

‘I was 33 years old when the Civil War broke out, but I was excused from duty because I had lost the index finger on my right hand.’”

“Have you always been as well as you are now?” he was asked. ‘No, I have had pneumonia several times, and been very low,’ was his reply, ‘but some way I have come through. I am a temperate man and belong to the grange.’ “He is deacon in the Baptist church in Colebrook, North.” [This today is the Church in the Wildwood.]

“How long have you owned your farm?” ‘It is 57 years, and it has been over half a century since I paid any interest.’ [This would have his ownership commencing about 1864, which seems right, as that is the first year that he participated in an election. As a good old Yankee farmer, he paid off his mortgage in seven years so as not to have to “pay any interest.”]

“Have you noticed a change in the manner of farming to any extent?” ‘Yes, the farmers used to keep a lot of sheep in this section, but now they do not do it, and all the pastures are being ruined. They are not fed as they should be. Farmers are making a mistake not to keep sheep.’”

[Poor Orrin would turn over in his grave if he could see what our pastures look like these days. I complain about it, but in his day land manuring was at an entirely different level, and he wouldn’t think very highly of my standards, I’m afraid.

If anyone would like to see and inspect an example of Orrin’s workmanship, visit the Colebrook Historical Society and ask to see the great wheel in the fabric room. He made that in his workshop, and if he received the average fee for making such a spinning wheel, he ended up three dollars richer. Our family owned this wheel, and used it. My grandmother said that it was a particularly nicely balanced wheel. Today it reposes at the society in perfect working order, awaiting the next batch of wool that will never come.]

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg