

Will Remembers the Turn of the Century — But Doesn't See Any Point in Turning Back the Clock

by Ruth W. Page

Will Wool was born in Essex Center on January 27, 1886, and can remember names, places, and even dates—give or take a year or two—for the past eighty years.

This made an interview with the popular neighbor, raconteur, and public servant a bit embarrassing, as this reporter can barely remember the highlights of what happened last week.

Will was born, he told us, in the house in the Center where Perry Towers lives now, and he went to school in what is now the 2-room White School, but was then a one room rural school.

"After that I went to another elementary school in Essex," he said, "but it burned down now."

Wool completed his education at the Essex Classical Institute, a facility for which he later became a Trustee.

At the turn of the century, Will and his brother Ralph went into business. They bought a milk

route from Clark Remington, and twice a day delivered milk in Essex village and at Fort Ethan Allen.

"We took the milk on a cart in big cans," Will says, "and then poured it into smaller, one-handled cans. People left their jars or cans out for us, and we filled them. Milk cost about four or five cents a quart in those days."

For nine years the brothers kept their milk route, purchasing tested milk (as required by the government) from Dr. Dan Johnson's farm (now Marvin Hts.) for sale to service families at the fort.

Then Dr. Johnson sold his farm, and Will

looked for other occupation. At that time, he said, Essex Junction in its basic geography was not unlike what it is today: major streets were all there, and many buildings were the same.

Will said he could remember the fire in 1893 when the flatiron shaped building on the corner of Main and Railroad Streets burned down; the next year, Samuel Brownell erected the present Brownell block with its "1894" proudly set in a scallop of stone atop the edifice.

"You know, I think there was a flatiron building on your corner, too," Will said, referring to the Essex Publishing Company site across from the Brownell block. "Of course, those buildings weren't as big as the ones now."

Out in the Center, Will remembers when Wood's apartments was a hotel ("it was a hotel a hundred and fifty years ago," he said. "Can you remember that?" we asked? "Easily," said Will). In fact, he



This is William Henry "Will" Wool as a young man. He was most notably remembered as a director of the Champlain Valley Fair and "host" of the horticulture building. Because he served as a town lister for 26 years, he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the local people and property. He served on the town school board, and as a trustee of Essex Classical Institute for more than 50 years.

added, he could just remember the death of Mr. Ferguson, then the hotel-keeper, about 75 years ago.

Other old buildings in the Center he mentioned included Municipal Manager Ed Lamb's home, which has been there many years, and the building where the new post office is housed, which used to be a store run by Thaddeus Fletcher.

Thaddeus Fletcher was the father of Mary Fletcher, who endowed the Burlington hospital which bears her name.

Reminiscing further, Will said he remembers the flood of 1927 clearly enough (he laughed at us for asking the question) but said it hadn't affected Essex much, though bridges were washed out and water was high.

"But I remember that it happened on a Thursday and Friday, and the water began to go down on Saturday. Sunday it was nice and sunny, and my brother and I were going to go to Stowe. When we got to the notch road, officers made us turn back-that was the only way the people had of getting out, and no one else was let through."

Getting back to Will's career, after he and his brother sold the milk route, Will went to work for the telephone company (that was 1912) as a repairman, and stayed in the job for nine years.

"I worked all around here-and in Jericho and Underhill and other towns-and I really got to know all the people in the area," Will told us.

He married in 1910, and Will and Stella had five daughters, and now have 11 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

After completing his work as phone repairman, Will came home and stuck to farming.

"I was just six months too old to be drafted in World War I," he said, "I had to register, but I was over thirty."

The Wools had a busy, if not a very large, farm, and kept thirty head of Jersey cattle.

All his life, Will has served his community in various ways. "I think it was about 1916 I was first elected to the School Board," he said, "and I can't remember exactly how many years I stayed on it, but it was too long; I was on during World

War I, because I remember we used the high school (formerly Essex Classical Institute) land to grow vegetables for the war effort. We had an agricultural course then, and the students made the farm."

For many years, Will was a Trustee of the Essex Classical Institute, and for thirty-nine years he served as President of its Board.

He is now a lister, and has served in that capacity for about 22 years; and in 1925, he was his Town Representative to the legislature.

One of Will's big interests has been the Champlain Valley Fair, which developed from a tiny inspiration of many years ago. Will remember it thus:

"Back in 1913, I was the first Fair Manager. It started just as a Grange meeting. We decided to have a Fair, just for one day. We used the Town Hall in Essex, and farmers brought their produce to show, and we had the horsemen come and lay out a track and we had races. It rained all day that first year, I remember.

"Then in 1921 we sold that place, and over the years the Champlain Valley Fair developed."

Will has been a director of the modern CV Fair for the past 14 years, has been in charge of the ever-larger exhibits in Horticulture Hall, and had much to do with the laying out of proper walk, grassy lawns, and fine flower beds.

He said that this year at the Fair a lady came to him who had turned up an old 1916 Premium list, so the Fair's history is not forgotten. When he had an active dairy farm, Will used to show his own cattle at the Fair, and even during the years when he did not serve in any official capacity. "I was always there as a visitor," he says.

Asked whether he'd like to see a return to the good, old horse and buggy days Will looked a bit taken aback, then replied, "I'm enjoying life the way it is now. I try to keep people happy, and I'm happy myself."

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