

May Aldrich Hague's account of life at the family farm in West Granville in the early 1900's.

The Farm

On reading 'The Diary of Noah Blake' by Eric Sloane, I felt carried back to my childhood and my listening to accounts told to us by my father about his youth in the 1860's and 70's and later to entries in his early diaries. He was born in Vermont in 1864. I tell my second grade pupils stories that make me seem "older than Carrie Pratt", as my mother used to say. Much as I hate to grow old, I'm willing to sacrifice any youthful image I might otherwise like to create, in order to share my childhood experiences with them. Among some of my peers, however, who are slightly younger, I have seen dramatically raised eyebrows, and heard expressions such as, "You rode on a trolley car! What's that? A horse car?" I will relate some memories of my youth here.

When I was a child, born in 1913, our family lived on a 365 acre farm on top of the hills of West Granville, Mass. Much of it consisted of woods, brush and rocks, though there were meadows, springs, (blueberries, cranberries, wintergreen and partridge berries, and bayberries), bounded by the Hubbard River on the west-requisites for the study of a lovely eco-system, except for a pond.

We had a 4-acre apple orchard (mostly Baldwins) back of the house, (still my gauge for estimating how much territory an acre would cover), and the "west orchard" beyond the barway to the lane leading to the cow pasture. In this orchard I first saw grafting of scions to an apple tree, which would result in the bearing, eventually, of a different species of apple. I'll never forget the first Opalescents I saw. I could hardly wait for them to ripen enough to eat. "Beauty is only skin deep" applies to fruit as well as to the fairer sex! They were huge, a beautiful deep red, but tasteless.

In this orchard of mostly Baldwins, there was also a Golden Russet, a Greening, a Gilly*flower, or Sheep-nose, a Seek-no-further, a Hurlburt Stripe, and nearby, a Northern Spy.

Below the house down the hill, [on the west side of the road] was the "old orchard"- just a few remnants of trees twisted and broken, where my sister would occasionally find an edible apple. There were assorted kinds - Roxbury Russet, Golden Sweet, Cat-head Russet (my grand-father's name for it), Janetta, Spitzenburg, Strawberry apple, and Golden Delicious.

Near the house and buildings, were an Early Harvest, an Astrakan, a Russet Sweet, a Wolf River, and a yellow apple that had a banana-like flavor.

I might mention that on the way to the Old Orchard, we passed the Cat Hole, a huge rock-pile (accumulation from land clearing) where dead cats and other small animals were interred. Usually we passed it gingerly, unless morbid curiosity got the better of us!

I remember once finding a little jaw bone with teeth in it. If an animal had died, we speculated [as] to whether it had gone to that rocky grave.

We had our own names for various areas of the farm. In addition to the three orchards mentioned, there was the pasture of our day, a sprawling area running a goodly portion of the length of the farm on the western boundary. There was the old sugar orchard, about a mile from the house. In early May, we found hepaticas, spring beauties and red trillium near the remains of the old saphouse. Between the barn and the pasture, was the "barn lot", and south of it, the "new-plowed piece", and the "oat-piece". South of these, were the "south lot", and the "twenty-acre lot", which was part of our pasture, and also a source of many of our high-bush blueberries. South of the "twenty-acre lot", was the "Parson's lot", originally another farm. Leading from our house-orchard and also from the entrance to the cow barn, was a lane leading to the pasture.

Except in winter months the cows were driven down daily. We used to accompany my father till we were old enough to go by ourselves. [End of page 1 in original document]. He would be in the barn when we got back, ready to "head them in", for sometimes they tried to "pull a fast one" and change places. The lane was about twelve or fifteen feet wide, and about a fifth of a mile long, bounded on either side by stonewalls and chokeberry bushes. It was often muddy, and we had to pick our way from hummock to hummock or stone to stone. There was the beauty of two or three wild apple trees, flowering in the spring, the old ash tree near the head of the lane, and the big old rock on which we sat the day my sister impressed me with the news that thunder bolts were big iron bolts the God of Thunder threw down from the sky during a thunder storm and if one hit you, it would kill you!

I still have the memory of a small green grass snake which entwined itself around my ankle when I accidentally stepped on its tail with my bare foot. I was excused from that chore till the shock wore off! On reaching the bar-way, we began calling or intoning the song of our fore-bears: "Come, cow, cow, cow". We would listen for the deep tones of the old copper cow-bell [around the cows' necks], for it would save us a lot of walking if we could head in the right direction. We carried walking sticks to steer the cows toward the gate or to break up a hassle between them, and also to help us over rough or muddy ground.

In one spot toward the north road, we had to watch our feet through the mud, and fight off huge laurel bushes that over-hung our path. If at any time either of us thought she heard the bell, she'd stop with "Hark!" and we'd again listen, to see if we were going in the right direction. If we were, we'd soon come to the ledges, where we might sit for a minute. From there was a grassy incline leading toward the sap-house, and if the ground were dry, we liked to lie down full-length and roll down the hill till rocks became too numerous to dodge.

Not far from the ledges was the "fox-spring" where my father used to set traps in the fall. My sister and I used to accompany him on his trap routes in several directions and didn't mind the long hikes, but we ran if he had caught any game, and had to put it out of its

misery. Later at home we rejoiced for him if he had a good catch that day, and watched him skin the animals and stretch their furs on wooden boards made by him for the purpose. One “by-product” of trapping was the skunk’s oil, made by trying out the fat and keeping it to rub on our chests to break up a chest cold or inflammation. You’d smell of it for days! [illegible script inserted here]

We always hoped the cows would be in the southern part of the pasture where the walking was easier. My father always cursed the terrain of our pastures which he compared with those of Vermont where he came from. First, we’d stop by the best spring of water which was near and directly down the hill from the barway. It had such a flow of water, my father encased the middle of it with a wooden box or frame so the cows would have clear water to drink, unmuddied by their feet. Nearby was the “chipmunk tree”, a huge old and decrepit hollow maple where chipmunks were challenged to play “hide-and-seek” with us. I think their antics in that tree inspired our love for Thornton Burgess’s stories of friendly little woods folks. Near the “chipmunk tree”, was a huge boulder, rather flat on top, surrounded by bayberry bushes.

One day at “cow-time”, a cow my sister was driving reversed the procedure and turned to chase her! She went round and round the rock till she found a place to climb through the thicket of brush and up onto the rock where she sat “screaming bloody murder”, out of anger more than fright. Nearby, aside the stonewall, grew a tall blackcherry tree. When the cherries were ripe, we tried to reach some for my mother who loved them. To me, they tasted too much like choke-cherries, very bitter. Proceeding towards the woods, we came to the area we referred to as “the hemlocks”. We loved [to] pick up the little cones, thinking of my father’s playing with them as a child, making believe they were cattle or sheep, around which he’d build a fence of sticks. No little toy animals or barns for him in his day! He created his own entertainment. [End of page 2 in original document]

Among the hemlocks stood a beechnut. In the fall the chipmunks and squirrels were always ahead of us and all we ever found were mostly empty shells- funny little three-sided affairs.

On southward towards the “twenty-acre lot”, [on our left], we came to the “clam-spring.” It was a muddy little spot, but we didn’t leave till we unearthed a tiny clam in the black mud. Those tiny mollusks were no bigger than this: [insert hand-drawn circle] [white] I wonder ~~still~~ if any are still there, if there are any in other springs, if the glacier brought them, or what. A real mystery –

In July and August, we lingered a bit, sampling the best blueberries as we went. Some were so much sweeter than others. Even the cows were known to munch on a few.

By this time, we would have found the cows somewhere, so we would go back to the barway where one of us would go ahead to let down the bars. (I’m reminded at that spot of one of the ministers we boarded who used to go down there before on Sunday, and practice his elocution by preaching his sermon to the wilds.)

On up the lane and into a corner of the barnyard and into the barn door. Our big barnyard was not only a way-station for cows, but the habitat of everything from snow-fleas in a January thaw, to peep-frogs in early spring, to newly-hatched chicks whose mother had “stolen a nest” under the barn. (The barnyard was sheltered on the west and north, good planning by the builders!) Much-loved birds such as barn swallows, robins, and water-pipits we always called type-tails, (funny little brown birds that bobbed their tails up and down as they sought food in the wet ground) were always a welcome sight in their season. In spring, it was a good place to dig dandelion greens, which we all loved, cooked with salt pork.

The barnyard was so wet in the spring, we had to place boards along the path from the bars-to-the-yard to the barn door. In the winter when the cows couldn't get down to the pasture to that spring, my father watered them at a trough he made in the barnyard at an old well. I was ever amazed at the color of the water, which looked like weak tea, much unlike the crystal clear water we drank from our 50 foot well near our back door.

Near the entrance to the barnyard on the north, was the horse barn we used when I was small. “Old Pet” [horse] was stabled there, and one Sunday when we drove in the yard from church, my father said it was time to feed her. I begged to be her benefactor, ran up the stairs (or up the ladder) into the haymow above and stabbed into a big forkful of hay. Hurrying toward her manger, I was about to shove the hay down into it, when I felt myself sliding beyond my control, and there I was- face to face with “Old Pet” with only the spokes of the manger between us! To hear me scream, you'd have thought I'd stabbed myself with the pitchfork! I was so sure she'd try to take a bite out of me!

I'll get back to the rest of the buildings after mentioning other “pieces” and “lots” and their various appellations. Directly south of the house, was the “garden lot” at one time, handy to the house and kitchen. Daddy's bee hives over-looked it. Below it, over a stonewall, was the “south lot”, across from the “Latham Place”. My father set out some asparagus plants there once, but he got a little hay off from it [also]. Below that, was the “Frog Ponds” and a dump of yesteryear. I wanted to dig in it but all I ever found in it was broken glass, rusty tin, and old worn-out boots. In spring, there would be such a chorus of frogs there, we could hear them all the way up to the house. I love that sound and never could determine whether they made me feel very happy, or very sad! Beyond that swamp, was the “Parsons' Lot.” It had a little mowing land, with woods farther back. In between, were more blueberries. We'd go picking with my mother, but I tired of it long before my sister did. I'd tease her to go back toward the road and sit on the carpets of lovely green moss beside the stonewall, where I'd probably eat half of what I'd picked. [End of page 3 in original document]

Across the road from the Parsons' Lot, was the old “cross road” leading to the old “Pease Place”. This was bordered on the north by the “acre lot”, which was a nice smooth little mowing lot. I used to think it would be a nice place for a house. North of that, past the swamp which was on both sides of the road, (with frogs), you'd come to another blueberry lot, on the Latham place. I'd hate going there because of the puff adders! We

found some snakes' eggs in the stonewall there once, looking like those little white-coated licorice candies, though these had soft "shells" like skin. We cut one open once with a knife, and a tiny snake crawled out. Near the road, was an old house- place and Uncle Olin's shingle mill. Back of it was an abandoned well which Daddy had covered so no one would fall into it. There used to be an old white sleigh in the mill and we girls would sit in it, calling "Giddy-ap" to make-believe horses. Back in those days of our childhood and before, tramps used to rove the country-side. I wonder how many ever spent the night in the shelter of that old mill, out of sight of our house.

Above the Latham Lot, next to the road was a lot, the upper part of which was once used for a garden. I remember when Daddy put in a row of mignonette among the vegetables. I loved the fragrance of it and so did the bees. I believe it was on one of these blossoms that a huge bumblebee lit and Leona showed me she wasn't afraid to pet him while it was feeding.

Above the garden, inside the barway, Daddy at one time built a pigpen- a quite respectable one, with a "bedroom", and a yard outdoors. When we were little, Daddy took pictures of us inside, stroking the pigs. After the pigs were no longer there, [and the] pen [was] completely free of any odor, we made a play-house out of it. We trudged across the road laden with blankets, and old pots and pans. We'd pick bunches of leafy weeds and make believe we were cooking "messes" of "greens", throwing in a piece of salt pork, in reality, a light colored stone.

East of the [Garden] Lot, extending to Miller's woods, was the "OxPasture". Running down the beginning of it were vestiges of the only split-rail fence I remember seeing on the farm. High bush blueberries grew along the fence, and also a few shadberry. The pasture had grown up to brush, and frogs lived in a marshy place near the brokendown rails. My sister and I tried to catch some once with bent pins and tiny snips of red flannel- no luck.

My folks left the farm in 1950 to live with us. So [in Westfield,] many times since, I'd feel like hopping in the car and going out home. But it wasn't home any more without my mother and father there, and it seemed odd, even in summer, not to find a fire "going" in the kitchen stove.

To mention the buildings as I remember them, I'll begin with the big cowbarn, facing the barnyard and dooryard. It tied up about eight cows in stalls, (no stanchions), had a calf-pen for the "young fry," and a larger pen for the cow about to calve. I still remember the nail where Daddy hung his lantern near the small high window where manure was thrown out onto the pile outside, later to serve as fertilizer.

Going at our own risk, as I did very gingerly in those days, we sneaked behind three cows on a narrow ledge between their heels and the calf-pen, to go around to the barn floor where we could turn to face the cows looking over their mangers, waiting for their forkful of sweet hay. After they were fed, a big wide board would be lowered on its hinges to keep their stalls free from cold and drafts (in winter). Across the big barn floor

where the big loads of hay were brought in, was a deep bay and above and to the left of it, a loft. We used to jump from there into the bay, where the depth of hay was sufficient. Fun! Another loft was over the cows. We seldom had to buy hay. Underneath the first loft I mentioned, was our earlier horse stall, and beyond that, the “bone room.” After butchering, my grand-father stored bones there, till a dealer came to buy them. My father later used this room to store his traps. [End of page 4 in original document]

Coming back toward the house, connecting the cowbarn with the outside woodshed, was first, a long barn used for storage of hay wagons, rakes, cultivators, stone boat, lumber wagon, buggy, and even an old delivery cart Uncle Olin once used to deliver meat. Then came our earliest horse barn, (where I fell into the manger). Next, the open woodshed, the nesting place of countless barn swallows. The cats didn't welcome them but we loved them, so swift and well-groomed!

Next, was the long ell of our house containing another woodshed, with an inside toilet, and a “back kitchen”, and “back buttery”, all of which could be reached without going outdoors. From the “back kitchen”, there were stairs leading down to the woodshed, and some leading up to the toilet. From the entrance to it, you could look up into a “back attic”. A man could climb up into it by pulling himself up, but we chose to enter it through my bedroom upstairs. We loved to poke around there where there was a very old sewing machine, an unusually long wooden cradle, almost invalid size- (there were such things), old pottery bottles, etc.

The kitchen I referred to was a summer kitchen in my grand-mother's day. It had an iron sink, a black stove, and two big wash-tubs on a frame with wringer in between. What a job! Heat the water, carry the hot to the wash tub, cold to the rinse tub, stand for hours over the scrub-board, and after rinsing and wringing, carry huge baskets out to the clothes-lines or in winter, up to lines in the attic. Taking them down, folding and ironing was still to come. I doubt if we girls helped her anywhere near enough. At the end of the kitchen near the woodshed, there was a long sturdy bench, where in the fall at butchering time, halves of the two hogs we raised were placed to be cut up and made into roasts, chops, and readied for making ham, bacon, sausage, lard, etc. My sister loved handling the raw meat. I only enjoyed eating it. Hated the butchering season! My father smoked the ham and bacon, and I've never tasted pork products to compare with them- sweet, tender and delicious.

Off this back kitchen was the back buttery, one of my favorite spots. In winter, its broad shelves bore the hams, roasts and sausages, as there they remained cold or frozen [& covered] through the winter. On upper shelves, were Daddy's bee-keeping equipment, old tea boxes. Hog scrapers, candle-sticks, and farther down, many tools handy to have nearby. On the broad shelf in front of the window were old iron kettles, “spiders” no longer in use, crocks of various sizes, etc.

Before I enter our kitchen in the main part of the house, I want to mention the candy hook to the left of the door. My father had brought down from Vermont a three-foot square marble slab, two inches thick, and an iron hook, for making molasses candy. He

boiled the molasses, testing it with a cold bit or drill, for the "brittle stage". After stirring the syrup, he poured it out on the marble slab to cool a bit. Then when it had stiffened enough, he picked up the whole mass with greased hands and threw it over the hook. He pulled it and pulled it till it became lighter and lighter in color and finer grained. Then he pulled off strips, stretching and laying them on the slab again, cutting them into four-inch pieces before they hardened. It took a lot of "know-how," "know when" and strength.

Before entering the main part of the house, we'll go back out across the dooryard to the henhouse and pigpen (the latter always used in winter.) The interior had plastered walls, no less! This building was either an old house moved up from the lot down across from the Latham place, or it was the original house built before ours. Opinions differed. A little corner of the henhouse on an outside wall was partitioned off into a summer toilet. (Another form of exercise common to those days.) My uncle, up for a weekend would embarrass us by sitting in there in full view of the yard, reading his paper. We often fed the hens their usual cracked corn, plus cabbage stumps and sugar beets in winter and occasional oyster shell. Sometimes had to fend off an ugly rooster or avoid a setting hen. [End of page 5 in original document]

The pig-pen was through a door into another room of this old house. We loved to watch the pigs slurp their food up from the trough. Our pigs were always clean, for my father gave them clean bedding each day. The also had a nice outdoor pen, and how they'd scramble up that chute, when we called, "Come, pig, pig, pig!"

A few feet south of this building was the "new horsebarn", with one stable and [a] hayloft above. We always enjoyed playing in here and in the open woodshed on rainy days.

Beyond this building, near the foundation of which, horse-radish grew, was another place I liked to putter around in- the shop. In it were a small forge and anvil, a long workbench with a vise and all sorts of tools, hardware, and bits and pieces of wood. Outside was "the lumber pile", stored for use in repair jobs. Outside to the south against the wall, Daddy placed his bee-hives. We avoided them!

We had no ice-house. My father built a corn-crib north of the house, but later closed it in to use as a cabin for extra sleeping room.

Back to the house, entering again the ell-part which was then 200 years old, its beams joined with wooden pegs, we [went] into our kitchen. It was long with two windows on the west, a fireplace with brick-lined ovens alongside [(to the east)], a sink and pump at one end, and a spacious pantry opposite the fireplace. In addition to shelves filled with pots and pans and dishes, there was a barrel of flour and a barrel of sugar. There was [a] broad shelf in front of the window, on the north where pies or puddings were set to cool and left-overs which were not too perishable were kept over-night. The cellar was an even cooler place to store food such as butter.

Straight through the kitchen past the cellar door, we came to a small room on the northwest corner we used as a dining room in warm weather. I always thought it was homier to eat in the kitchen at the long oval table with its red checked tablecloth.

If you'd turned right on your way into the dining room, you'd have entered what was the parlor before my day. There was a darling little stove in there. On winter evenings, we'd gather there with our apples, popcorn, and reading. Sometimes we'd take turns reading aloud, especially from a book such as "Peck's Bad Boy" which amused us all. While we were boarding the ministers and summer people from New York, this room was our dining room. Before the New York people came, it was the minister's room, and later became my father's bedroom in winter, so he could enjoy the heat from the stove.

On the southeast corner of the house was our "sitting room", with its "summer beam," funeral door and boarded up fireplace. A stove replaced each of the three fireplaces. How I longed to see one opened and in use! Still, it was nice to sit up close with your feet on the fender and toast your toes.

West of that room, a little room overlooked the dooryard. My grandfather slept there in my day, but I imagine it was meant for a "sick room", or a "borning room"- so handy to the kitchen and the heat of the "sitting room" stove. We had no electricity till the fall of 1940.

Off the "sitting room" near the old fireplace, was an L-shaped closet where we scrambled to dress morning and night in cold weather, as the central chimney gave out warmth. It was also a glorious catch-all, where we kept games, work-baskets, etc. Grandpa Nelson even kept a shiny big pair of dental forceps up on the top shelf and had sometimes used them to pull his own teeth!

There was a central staircase leading upstairs, from the front of the house to four bedrooms, two small rooms, a deep hall closet and two small closets off the biggest bedroom. My father and mother slept in the biggest room on the sunny southeast corner. It looked out on the front lawn and road on the east and onto the dooryard on the south. Leona and I had a smaller room next to theirs, also looking out over the dooryard. [End of page 6 of original document]

I was attached to that little room from where I could hear the cowbell at night, the frogs and toads in the barnyard, the birds at dawn (though they didn't tempt me to get up that early!), and I could be aware of what was going on outside. When I ever slept in another part of the house, I would hear a noise, but not be able to tell just where it was coming from. One thing I didn't enjoy was a cat-fight at night when the offenders were in the back attic, just the other side of the door beside my bed! I always (foolishly) felt they'd break through.

At the top of the stairs was the 'west bedroom", with a door leading out of it up to the attic, stretching over all the main part of the house. What a place that was to play on a rainy day or any other! Mother kept it neat, but we sometimes messed it up, hauling out

feather beds to jump on, dragging old books out of trunks, looking at old "National Geographics" and "American Magazines." In warm weather, the wasps kept us below stairs.

On the front northeast corner was Uncle Olin's room. He came to the farm so often to bring us goodies, do painting and make repairs, he really deserved to call one room his own. At the head of the back stairs leading out of the kitchen, were the little "rag room" and Daddy's "darkroom". In the first were stored an assortment of rags, really pieces of calico or percale to be used for quilt-making, or mending. My father took many pictures and did his own developing and printing in the darkroom he outfitted for that purpose. He sold many postcard scenes in surrounding towns, at small stores.

Last of all, I'll mention the cellar with its walls of big stones, and damp earthen floors. Little scrawny white ghost-like spiders used to intimidate as they hung from the low ceiling, though they hardly looked alive. I believe they are called "cellar spiders". We had huge bins of apples, potatoes, winter cabbage, Hubbard squash, and other root vegetables. Also a canning cupboard filled with fruit, vegetables, jams and jellies and even canned chicken. We were fully cognizant of what good providers we had for parents.

May A. Hague
Date - ?

Transcribed by Rene Ellinger, 2021
From the collection of the Mabel Root Henry Historical Museum at the Granville Public Library, Granville, Massachusetts.

May Aldrich Hague, West Granville, farm, Latham Place, Pease Place, Miller's woods,
George Aldrich, Major Nelson, West Hartland Road, Latham Place