

Memories of Wilmot: School Life In Wilmot In the Mid-1940s and 1950s

with Elizabeth Kirby and Charles Thompson

Transcript 04/06/21

Summary

In this documentary, Elizabeth Kirby and her brother Charles Thompson share stories of what school life was like in the mid-1940s and 1950s in Wilmot, New Hampshire. This video was recorded on October 1, 2020, by Wilmot Historical Society members Judy Hauck, Lindy Heim, and Fred Ögmundson, at the home of Charles on Cross Hill Road in Wilmot, just up from the original Thompson family home, where his sister Elizabeth now resides.

Transcript

Liz: In September of 1946, the Wilmot Flat School had a teacher named Miss Smith, and all eight grades were in the school. I believe there were about 18 or 20 students. Might have been one or two grades that didn't have anybody in them. Bob Rayno and David Rayno and I were in first grade and had no idea what we had ahead of us. The older kids were all new to us because I had never been to school before. There was no kindergarten. We were pretty much isolated up here on Cross Hill. My father took me to school every day, either walked with me or took me in the horse and wagon, when I was in first grade. That first year (my teacher was) was Miss Smith. My second, third, fourth, and fifth years were Esther LaPierre, and she was an absolutely marvelous teacher.

The oldest girl in school was Betty Lou Evans and her job in the wintertime was to get me out of my snowsuit when I got to school in the morning and get me back into it in the afternoon when it was time to go home. I saw her a few years ago and asked her if she remembered it, and she did. That was her job!

Charles: Well, when I got there in '49, they had just put in an oil burner. They had been burning wood up until that time. It was kind of curious because there was a woodshed out back—a wood pole frame structure—a good-sized building—a woodshed where they stored the wood. And of course the older boys would be charged with bringing in the wood. But as time went on, it appeared that when they ran out of wood, they started burning the woodshed, because when I got there the oil furnace was there and only half of the boards were on the side of the woodshed and some of the flooring had been taken up! So I have a feeling that in lean times they scavenged and made do with what they had.

Liz: The one fixture that was at the school for the entire time that both of us were there was Ola Morey. She lived in the house next door to the school, where the Kearsarge Vet is now. She was a maiden lady, who was born and raised in Wilmot and had cared for her parents until they died. She was the janitor. She did the sweeping. She started

the fire in the woodstove when it was there. She brought the water over to put in a big round crock in the corner of the room. Then there were cups allotted to each kid. They got a paper cup every day, and that's how they got to have water to drink that day.

Ola was a magnificent musician. She played the organ and the piano. She did give music lessons to people from time to time, but she was one of these very wonderful people that provided stability and a sense of what's right and wrong.

Charles: She was the organist in the (Wilmot Flat Baptist) church also, and my sister and I were in the church from the time the church was (re)built. And as we grew up, we sang a lot of duets in church. And during noon hour at school, if we had a duet coming up, we'd go over to Ola Morey's house, and she'd play something for us, and we'd practice, and I guess she (Liz) was singing alto and I sang something, and we practiced for church at Ola's house. She probably couldn't do that today.

She owned the big the property across the road where they had the big steep hill. And that's right, and we'd all go over there and slide at noon time during the winter hours.

The ball field is where the farmers market now takes place or where the bandstand is. And my sister's classmate Bob Rayno was sort of my hero, when I got there as a little kid. And as you got older playing ball, Bob batted from the left-hand side of the plate and so I did too. But it was not unusual with home plate being up near the parking area and first base down by the gazebo, the bandstand, that when Bob got to the plate, he'd hit the ball out into the pond. And the pond behind the school was much different than it is today. There was a dam down by the by the monument and the water level—it was an honest to goodness pond; the water was right up near the road like Tannery Pond is, and there was skating on there in the wintertime. But Bob would hit the ball into the pond, and at that point the game stopped, and Bob would, or he and Dave would, run around the corner up to Arthur Rand's house and down the back and out on his dock and jump in his boat and row out into the pond to get the ball and come back. And we'd pick up the game because we only had one baseball. And so it got to the point when Bob came to bat, everybody groaned because we figured that the game was going to be held up for a while.

My sister mentioned father taking her down to school in the wagon. When I was in the first grade we went down in a horse and wagon also. This was in 1949. People were already driving cars at that time. But there were no cars in our family. And after that point we walked to school, and in wintertime and so forth, we'd walk down the road along Campground Road and down to the school.

But during the good weather, we would frequently go what we called "cross lots," and we'd go down the hill to the point where the land levels off, and we'd cut over into the

woods and just up from Mr. Baker's property line-fence for his cows. And we'd walk all the way over to where we came in at Shindagan Road, near where Jay Macleod lives now. And there was a cattle underpass there, and it was a beautiful structure. It was all stoned up on both sides so Mr. Baker's cows could go from one side of the road to the other and there were big slabs of stone right across the top, and we would go through that. Except, if some cows had been through, we'd go through. If they hadn't been through, there were too many cobwebs and spiders and so forth, so we'd just go over the road and continue on out over what is now the power line, and we came out behind the Kelly's house, which is the house that is diagonally opposite the Soldier's Monument, on the other side of Blackwater River. There was a bridge there, so we could come out and walk right over to the school. And then we'd go back the same way.

Liz: The two rivers joined there.

Charles: Yes, the two rivers joined there, so it was a good place to cross. But that was all woods at the time. And we were out marching around in the woods, and nobody knew where we were or anything. It was interesting.

Liz: Yep.

Charles: We caught a lot of rides with very generous people. If we had to go to Franklin, Clarence Howard would pick us up at the corner of Pancake Street and Campground Road, and we'd ride to Franklin with him to go to the dentist or see my grandmother who lived there. But we walked a lot.

One of the things about walking, my sister mentioned the Grange meetings. We went to Grange meetings regardless of what the weather was—and to church—and came home 11 o'clock at night, walking back from Wilmot Center on a cold night in February.

But when we left the house, we had what we called freestones. Freestones were actually pieces of gravestones—broken pieces of gravestones. And you might remember that I mentioned something about Mr. Uran's grave being lost in oblivion. We don't know where it was, and it may well be that the gravestones were hit by a mowing machine, or the cows knocked it over or something like that, and they're broken. And maybe they were some of the gravestones—some of the freestones we had.

But they would be put on the stove at night when we left, and they'd be about an inch thick and nine by twelve inches something of that nature, irregular in shape. When you came home, they'd be taken off the stove and wrapped up first in newspaper, and then in brown paper, and then wrapped like a Christmas present with string and everybody would get two: one for the feet and one to hang on to. And you'd go to bed with those,

and that was a routine every night. In the morning they came out and got ready to be put on the stove again the next night. That was electric blankets for us!

Liz: The last three years that I was at Wilmot Flat School, Gladys Murray was my teacher, and she came from New London, and she was she was also a good teacher. I was fortunate to have seven years of good education in a one-room school in all eight grades. I graduated from Wilmot Flat School in 1954, along with Bob Rayno and Jim Lorden, and they had a community graduation because Wilmot Center also had a one-room school with all eight grades. So, the graduating eighth graders got together for one graduation for the whole town. Bill Clapper and Sue Roberts and Mike Van Hook were the kids from Wilmot Center, and there were six in the graduating class in 1954 from Wilmot, New Hampshire. All of us ended up going to Andover High School.

The way that worked—the town paid tuition for Wilmot students to go to any high school that they chose. The older kids, as soon as they were 16, got a license and provided transportation for the entire group—as many as could be piled into the car. So by this time, of course, my mother was teaching, and so she would take us down to Wilmot Flat, and I guess that probably Speed Cutler drove. He was a couple of years older than I, and as soon as he was 16, Jim Lorden had his car, and he drove to Andover.

Sometimes the parents would drop us off or pick us up or whatever. We made arrangements and did what we had to do. But four years at Andover high school. There were 25 or 35 in my class when I started at Andover High—when I started, and 25 graduated. It was the largest class up until that time that had ever graduated from Andover High School, maybe ever. I think probably ever.

Charles: I went to grade school down here in 1949. Mrs. LaPierre was there. She was a great teacher. And then at the end of my sixth grade, the town decided to split the schools and divide the two schools, so the grades one through four were in the village here at Wilmot Flat, and five through eight were in the Wilmot Center. So I had six years at Wilmot Flat and two years at Wilmot Center.

By that time, again my mother, we, had a car, and they dropped me off at Cutler's store. And the bus that started up at the Atwood's house in North Wilmot came down through to drop off kids there (the Center), would come to Wilmot Flat, drop off kids there, pick me up and take me back to Wilmot Center. But there just were two people in my class, Pat Weed and I.

When I got to high school, I went to Andover High School. There were 17 in my graduating class, I think. And I have to say that my Andover high school preparation was not that good. They went out of business, so to speak, two years after I graduated,

and I was off to college. And then the kids started getting a better education. But the school was never funded. They never had good teachers except for Jackie Rayno.

Liz: Jackie Rayno was awesome.

Charles: Yeah, she was terrific. Jackie Rayno was terrific. In fact, I rode to school with her my senior year.

I had the chance here a couple of years ago to speak to a college class in a nearby school, and in the course of it, we had some questions and answers. And I said to them, before the class was over, I said, "I hope there's some time in your life you can look back at a period of time in your life that were the best years of your life."

I don't know if they will, but I know that when my generation—when we get together and talk—boy, the 50s and 60s, they were good years. I mean people had jobs. We weren't at war. We came and went as we pleased. We had bicycles, and we'd take off in the morning come home at night. Or I'd go off in the woods with my .22 rifle and come back for supper. It was just a very carefree time, and I don't know that these people from here on, I don't think they'll ever enjoy that. It's sad, but anyway, it's just an observation.

Liz: One of the things that we did here at home, we were each other's companions. There were no other kids anywhere around, so when we weren't at school, we were each other's, not entertainment necessarily, but we were very interdependent and independent.

We were left very much to ourselves. There was no fear of anything happening to you. We were on the honor system a great deal of the time. One of the things that I remember, probably I may have been in fifth or sixth grade, something like that, our parents had gotten a ride to go to Franklin to go shopping that day, and we had been given orders that when we got out of school, we would come straight home.

Well, David and Bob Rayno had some comic books, and they invited us to go and read comic books in David Rayno's barn. So now David Rayno's house is across from the what's now the apartment building across from the Town Office on the opposite side of the ball field from the Town Office, and I could not resist seeing some new comic books. I love to read, so we went over there and read longer than we should have. At least speaking for myself, I don't recall that you might have been an honorable person and come home. I don't remember you being there necessarily. But I finally said I better get myself home, and I came home, and my parents had gotten home before I did. And so, I was caught flat-footed disobeying.

My punishment was one of the most significant punishments I think I've ever gotten.

While in Franklin, my mother had bought me a bureau scarf to embroider with all of the floss and everything. She showed it to me, and she told me about it, but I did not get to start using it for at least two weeks maybe a month after that. A restriction like that made an impression on me.

Liz: Back in the day Shredded Wheat had cards between the layers of biscuits. And on the cards, there was information about Indian lore and how to do things Indian, which was totally fascinating. So, we decided that we were going to be out here in the country and that we would have our own village or whatever. So right over here in back of us, there's a ledge, which seemed to be appropriate, and we created Thompson Park on that ledge. We had a place for a fire. I don't think we ever did have a fire, but we had a place for a fire. And we had a walkway, and the stones are still there as a matter of fact for the walkway. And we entertained ourselves. I remember one thing though—one of the things they taught us—how to make clay pots. And I couldn't figure out why, if I just dug dirt up here, I couldn't make a clay pot. But it never did work. We had bows and arrows and also just any number of things that that we learned from Shredded Wheat.

Charles: We pulled the cards out, and then lo and behold, we had a box full of shredded wheat to eat—before we could get another box.

Liz: Yes, and then sometimes you would get a box, and you already had all the cards. And that was a disappointment. You really couldn't trade them off like baseball cards. Nobody else got them.

Charles: But it was a case of making your own entertainment, and that, I think, is one of the good things about solitary youth is that you become available and become able to create your own entertainment and become more inventive. I built more things than I can imagine I can remember. And it was all good.

Credits

Wilmot Historical Society Members

Videographer: Judy Hauck

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Music

Our Story Begins by Kevin MacLeod

Link: <https://incompetech.filmmusic.io/song/4181-our-story-begins>

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