

Memoires of Wilmot: The Grange in Wilmot

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Summary

In this documentary, Liz Kirby, and her brother Charles Thompson share stories and some of the history of the Grange in Wilmot, New Hampshire. This interview was recorded on October 29, 2020, by the Wilmot Historical Society members Judy Hauck, Lindy Heim, and Fred Ögmundson at the home of Charles and Jackie Thompson, on Cross Hill Road in Wilmot, New Hampshire.

Manuscript

Liz: The first Grange was called Kearsarge Grange and in 1882 it was organized in Wilmot Flat. Meetings were held at the GAR Hall, which was located beside the post office, where the [current] post office is now. It was eventually removed [razed] and the [current] Wilmot Community Center building [was erected behind]. But the Grange, I think, purchased that building from the GAR. GAR was the Grand Army of the Republic, which was an organization of veterans of the civil war, and it was very active from the mid 1860s on, probably for as long as the veterans continued to live and be active. But in 1882 there was a reorganization after a short time when the Grange had started and then stopped. And the charter members, here again, included our ancestors Lina and Will Thompson.

Grange is a word for a farm. Coming from the English. In England a farm is called a grange. Its (the Grange) official name is Patrons of Husbandry, and of course, husbandry is the profession of a farmer who works on a grange. The secretary of agriculture after the civil war was named Oliver Hudson Kelly. He took it upon himself to teach the people, in the various parts of the country, to learn the correct way of managing agriculture. Of course, there were no longer slaves to be doing the work in the south, so the agriculture in the south had to be reorganized to be productive.

It was a concept that spread very rapidly throughout the country. One of the very earliest achievements of the Grange was in the Midwest. The farmers there were growing grains and livestock and all sorts of farm products, which needed to go to the cities to be sold—needed to go to market. And the railroads, of course, were very up and coming, and they were not cooperative with transporting the agricultural products. Prices were all over the place. It was unreasonable. They did not cooperate with the farmers, and so the farmers banded together to confront the railroad people as a strong group to achieve what they needed to do to survive. So that was one of the very, very early goals of the Grange—to maintain the well-being of the rural people, not only here in New England but in the entire country. That was very important also.

So, Wilmot was a small, much smaller town after the Civil War. Many of the people after the Civil War, when they saw the other parts of the country and saw there were much better farming options there than here on these granite strewn hills, and very hard labor involved with farming here, did not come back to New Hampshire after the

war. So, their families, who were left here, needed to also relearn how to function and how to survive.

Socialization was important to people. The only socialization they had was family. A lot of families had been disrupted. The church organizations and so forth, and the women's organizations, which were pretty much associated with the church [were important social outlets]. The Grange was founded on the premise that the wife of the farmer [was important]. [After the war] Farmers were women of course because they no longer had husbands in their lives, and so it made women a very integral part of the organization. There are four officers in the Grange that can be held only by women. And this was back in the late 1870s, 1880s, along in there, long before women got the vote and suffrage became the thing to be worked toward. So, in 1882, Kearsarge Grange was reorganized and became a very strong factor in the lives of the people of Wilmot Flat. People from Wilmot Center and North Wilmot also joined Kearsarge Grange. But if you're going from North Wilmot to a Grange meeting in Wilmot Flat with a horse and buggy, or in the wintertime with a sled, it's going to be time-consuming, and not convenient at all. So, I think that eventually people started saying "well, we need to have another one that's closer to North Wilmot and Wilmot Center."

So, in 1902, Wilmot Grange was formed, and they met at Wilmot Town Hall. I'm not sure where they met until the town hall was built in 1907. Haven't really found that in the records that I've seen. They might have met at the old town house, which is probable. But that being said, here again, the charter members were a very active group, and a great number of them were from North Wilmot. They continued with the premises and the teachings of the Grange, and just really made it an important part of their lives. Grange meetings were held twice a month. The one at Wilmot Flat, Kearsarge Grange, was the first and third Tuesday of the month. And Wilmot Grange was the first and third Friday of the month. Granges were very social, and found out that, hey, the Grange in New London was going to have a special "do." Let's go to it. And it became an event. They would go to visit—Granges in Danbury and Andover and anywhere around that were within going distance.

The Grange has seven degrees. The first four are your local Grange. The fifth one is regional. It's called the Pomona Grange. It's not exactly laid out by county, but it is a region that is set aside to be this group. The State Grange is the sixth degree, and that covers the entire state of New Hampshire, and the other states also. And then, of course, the National Grange has representatives from the entire country. It was influential in that the people could learn to interact, meet people from other Granges, and interact with them and share functions. My father became what they called a deputy of the master of the State Grange. The deputy was a representative of the State Grange who went to each Grange twice a year, once in the spring for what they called instruction and once in the fall for inspection, and explained what the new plans

were for the organization; what was new in farming; activities and so forth and kind of held it together. It was a representative that kept the local Grange in touch with the State Grange. He would walk from where he lived, right down here on Cross Hill. He would walk as far as Warner, Sutton, New London. I don't know his entire territory, but he would walk for many, many miles to go to a Grange meeting to do the duties of the deputy for that Grange. We have a five-dollar gold piece that was paid to him for going to do an installation. He went places and did things, and he loved it, and they loved him. He was quite dashing. He was tall and dark-haired with a very distinctive mustache, and he was well welcomed wherever he went.

The Grange is where my parents met each other because when my mother got out of Keene Normal School and became a schoolteacher, her first job was teaching up in North Wilmot. I think we've talked about that before—at two of the schools up there. And she boarded with the students' parents and some of the others. And I believe it was the Atwood family who convinced her that she needed to join the Grange at Wilmot Center and become a part of the community, and which she did. She very quickly became the secretary of Wilmot Grange, and that was part of Arthur Thompson's jurisdiction. So, when he went to have their inspection in the fall, part of his job was to inspect the secretary's books and the treasurer's books. And the treasurer, Leon Sawyer from North Wilmot, introduced Annie Whittemore from North Wilmot (originally from Andover) to Arthur Thompson from Wilmot Flat. And they eventually got married in September of 1936. They were both loyal to their own Granges, so for as long as they lived, he continued to belong to and participate in Kearsarge Grange at Wilmot Flat, and she at Wilmot Grange in Wilmot Center.

Kearsarge Grange dwindled as the years went by, and I believe that they dissolved and merged with Wilmot Grange in Wilmot Center in the 1960s —during that time frame— and eventually the Wilmot Grange in Wilmot Center had dwindling membership. It was in the early 2000s, no, it was in the 1990s, I believe, that the people who had been the backbone of the Grange were gone, and so they merged with Blackwater Grange in Andover, and eventually Blackwater Grange merged with Blazing Star Grange in Danbury.

Charles: Just a word about the collegiality of the Grange members. When my parents were married, shortly after they were married, one evening they had gone to bed. In an hour or so after they were in bed, they heard this loud ruckus in the yard and people came marching into the house wresting them out of bed, and it was their Grange friends for some sort of a housewarming or something. And the lasting memory I have of my father telling me was that every time he tried to start a fire in the kitchen stove, he turned around to get a match, and somebody had poured water on the kindling. So, they were a raucous bunch, I'll tell you.... Just an aside.

Liz: The Grange always had a program as part of their meeting. There were stories and skits and poems and songs, a lot of music. There's a lot of music in the ritual work of the Grange. It is a fraternal secret organization, which I think has been modified over the years somewhat, but that was another way in which we were involved with music and socialization.

The thing that influenced me the most about the Grange was my ability to walk into any room anywhere, with any people, any type of people, and be able to strike up a conversation with any one of them and be comfortable with them. And they were happy to talk to me. When you meet as many people as we did, under those circumstances, that it just was a matter of, you know, you either sat on the side and missed everything, or you got in there and got involved and did it. So, it's interesting because Charles was a member of Kearsarge Grange with his father, and I was a member of Wilmot Grange with my mother. Of course, four nights out of every month the whole family had to go to Grange because everybody went to everybody else's—not exactly what he (Charles) and I wanted to do. We would much rather have stayed at home and studied or done other things—school activities and so forth—but this was what we did, and there was no question about it.

The other things that the Grange did were very much participating in the community. I think we may have mentioned in the past that they were very influential in getting electricity to the rural areas in New Hampshire and doing other things for the community. They would notice people who were influential in the community, who were very proactive and helpful in the community, and they would, once a year, they would have an open meeting where they did not do the ritualistic secret work and invited people from the community and their families and so forth. And along at the middle of the meeting, they would say, "We have, as you know, we have a special program right now," and they would tell the story of what this particular person had been doing for the community. "Our special person for tonight is Jane Doe, and we have noticed that she has been very active in helping with the food pantry, etc." And Jane Doe would be sitting there thinking "what's going on here?" And in a few minutes, she would be escorted up to the altar and presented, probably with flowers or a gift, and recognized as, and given a certificate as, being an outstanding citizen of the community.

Long after my brother and I both had become distant members, but still members of the Grange, it was time for me to receive my 25-year certificate for being a Granger. So, I made my way, I came back home, and my brother presented me with my 25-year certificate. And my father, who was one of the officers that did the escorting, called the assistant steward, escorted me to the altar. And so, it was a bit of a family affair.

Caroline Lajoie was the lady assistant steward, and so the two of them escorted me. Caroline was Esther Grace's mother, and she was very active in the Grange. The Grange fairs were held every fall. And you started out first thing in the morning. They set up tables all the way around the outside edge of the of the town hall, and by two in the afternoon, they were laden down with farm products, vegetables and fruit, anything, I think it was in October when it was usually held, and anything that was able to be picked and shown off was there. You had huge pumpkins, and you had bunches of, I think, radishes may have gone by then. And, of course, stuff that had already been canned—the preserves. I think occasionally, someone might bring a newborn or a young animal. And so, then there would be a big supper. There would be...it was competition. There were pies that were baked, and there was someone there, a group, who sampled the pies and decided which one got the blue ribbon and the red ribbon and then the also-rans. So, it was a lot of competition. Most of it was friendly. And then there was a supper, which was generally ham and beans, I think, at Grange fair. And oftentimes a play or entertainment, either local or imported, for the evening. So, it was - it was a big weekend, and it was a great fundraiser for the Grange. You paid for your dinner and probably for the entertainment. However, I think a lot of times payment was probably a nickel or a dime for entertainment, and maybe a quarter for the dinner. I don't really recall. But it was, you know, not like it is now—a lot of hard work and people did all of this on top of maintaining their homes and their farms and everything, and they found a way to do all of it. So, the Grange was very important in its time around here. The old timers, (were) the backbone of the Grange. People died and moved away, and it became depleted, and with the changes in the type of people that lived here, they did not have the interest in it. They did not have a reason to be interested in it. Television came along. Children were involved in sports activities and so forth, and it just ceased to be viable under these circumstances. But it was a very important part of our lives.

Lindy: Did the Grange support the military?

Liz: Yes, they did. They, during World War II, they sent packages to the military men that were from the Grange. There was a picture on the wall of the Grange—or a big frame that had the pictures of, I think, about 12 to 15 young men who were Grange members who were in the military. And they sent letters and packages and so forth to them. They always kept in, you know, kept in touch and knew what was going on.

Each Grange had its own service flag. In World War II any family who had a person in military was entitled to have a service flag in their window. The Grange at Wilmot Center had all blue stars, and the one at Wilmot Flat had many blue stars and one gold star. I'm still working on trying to find out who the gold star represents for Kearsarge Grange. A service flag is about so wide and about so tall, and a blue star on the service flag meant that you had a family member in military. A gold star meant that you had had a service member who was killed in your family. The Grange

functioned as a family in a lot of ways. These flags are in the Wilmot historical room, and there is an article and pictures of them on our website.

Lindy: On behalf of the Wilmot Historical Society, I would like to thank you, Liz, and Charles, for sharing your life stories with us over these past few days. We have enjoyed ourselves immensely. Judy Hauck has been our videographer. Fred Ögmundson has come occasionally and been part of the interviewing process. Catherine Stearns, our vice president at the historical society, is also an amateur Wilmot historian, and myself Lindy Heim, is sometimes part of the interview process. All had a wonderful time hearing your stories. Thank you so much.

CREDITS

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Videographer: Judy Hauck

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A Special Thank You To

Catherine Stearns, Wilmot Historical Society Vice President

Music

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