RECOLLECTIONS OF THE EARLY DAYS OF OAKLAND

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Rev. William Allen Hatch, Now of St. Louis, Recalls "West Waterville" as a "mere Hamlet." – The Rival Upper and Lower Mills – A Country Grocer of the Old Days. – The Adventurous Youth of Oakland's Postmaster. – New Industries.

[Written for Lewiston Journal.]

The old and long established industries of Oakland were described in our issue of last Saturday, but within the last year other and equally important ones have come in and these have given the village the greatest boom in its history. For example, the Forster Manfg. Co. of Dixfield has established a new toothpick factory in this place and will hereafter do business on a much larger scale. They have just completed the new building in the outskirts of the village, and this covers a space of 168 x 80 feet, with a storehouse 80 x 80 feet in addition to the wings. The factory is now practically in operation and a force of some 150 men and women will soon be given constant employment. This plant will be run by electricity, and the machinery is all of the most modern type. The president of the company is M. W. Forster; Albert Hall is general superintendent, and the master mechanic is J O Eaton. A 300-horse-power motor has been installed and this shows the scale on which the business will be conducted. Truly the village is fortunate in securing this great manufacturing establishment.

Still another important industry that has just settled in Oakland is the Schmick Handle and Lumber Company from William, West Virginia, and Hamburg, Penn. The two plants are virtually one and the same and they have come to Maine because their lumber can be procured more easily. The manufacture of broom handles is the specialty of this company as it is claimed to be cheaper to do this than to ship the broom corn here and the finished product back again. This is the largest company of the kind in the world and they market their goods in every part of the country.

The company have been here less than one year and their plant has caused a great boom in the place. The building is 200 x 100 feet in size and both steam and electricity will be used for power. On so large a scale do they carry on business that six car loads of lumber, containing 20,000 feet are required every day in the manufacture of broom handles. W. E. Schmick is the president and general manager of the company. C. J. Tobias is the local superintendent and G. H. Plunkett mill foreman. The office force is in charge of A. C. Glazier, and with the great volume of business all of these are kept busy. No less than 40,000 handles are turned out every day as one item, while their chair stock is another large branch. The company has purchased from the Hollinsworth & Whitney corporation two townships of wild land near Bald mountain and from this source will furnish their own lumber. They have constructed an artificial pond at the mill and into this the lumber is taken from the cars and then drawn up by endless carriers into the building. It is certainly a great enterprise and coming as it does from another state a large force of workmen are brought into the village for whom homes must be provided. Here is a great chance for the investment of capital in building cottages and already this work is well under way.

Oakland has many able and energetic business men, and among these G. W. Goulding, postmaster, and president of the Messalonskee National Bank, is one of the foremost. This gentleman has a history that reads like a romance. Brought to West Waterville when a small child, where he lived until he was twelve, he was then sent to Minnesota to be brought up by an uncle. Not relishing the sort of treatment that he received from this relative, the young lad ran away, and constructing a rude raft, he boldly started up the Mississippi river, where he soon landed among hostile Indians. These he managed to escape and held down his scalp until the breaking out of the Civil war, when at 19 years of age he enlisted in the First Minnesota Regiment and hiked 200 miles to Fort Ripley, where a regiment of regular soldiers were relieved. That was the outpost of civilization and there he had all sorts of experiences with the Indians until his regiment was sent to Washington and Alexandria where he was in camp for a short time. He was in that city when Col. Ellsworth was shot and passed there all those exciting scenes.

From that time young Goulding followed all the fortunes of his regiment. He was in a score of battles, among which some of the most bloody were Bull Run, Battle Bluff, Yorktown, Withamsburg, Fair Oaks, Savage Station, Glendale, White Oak Swamp, Malvern Hill, Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Bristow Station, Mine Run, and for a time in that conflict with Moseby's guerrillas. At Gettysburg his regiment lost 88 [33?] out of every hundred men in its ranks but fortunately he was in the hospital nursing a wound at that time or he would probably have been left in a trench with the others.

Not until late in 1866 was Mr. Goulding discharged and then he came directly to Oakland and sort of grew up with the place. He has represented the town in many honorable positions and for thirteen years has been the village postmaster having been appointed by President McKinley and reappointed by Roosevelt and Taft. It was this hustling gentleman who was guide of the writer in looking over the big manufacturing plants of Oakland and a swift auto managed by Gayford, of the garage, was placed at his disposal. With the ex-member of the legislature and all-around hustler and also with the assistance of one of the brightest women in town, it would have been the fault of the writer had he failed to get plenty of material for an article. In fact, they filled him so full that this second story of Oakland is the result.

In the former article on Oakland mention was made of the Hatch brothers who were born in this village and whose old home is still standing in good preservation. It is situated on Summer street, and tradition says that the first store in the community stood on the same spot. The place is now owned by Mrs. Olive Briggs and it may well be called one of the historic landmarks of the town, The Shepherd home is on Water street, and as near as can be learned was built by a pioneer named Samuel Kimball about 125 years ago. At a later day it passed into the possession of Obed Shepherd and is now the property and home of his grandson, Richard Shepherd. This is undoubtedly the oldest house in Oakland that is still standing at this time, and as a historic structure is indeed venerable.

The article written by Henry Hatch and published in our last story was supplemented in the Tuesday club of Oakland by an equally interesting paper by his brother, the Rev. Wm. Allen Hatch, of St. Louis. This was read before the club by his niece, Miss Helen A. Smiley, and kindly loaned by her to the Journal. Like the story of his Los Angeles brother it is full of reminiscent anecdote and extremely interesting. With the permission of Miss Smiley we herewith print the letter in full.

Recollections of West Waterville By Rev. William Allen Hatch.

When my father moved to West Waterville, there was on his property, near the shore of the lake, the ruins of an old potash factory, and near this were two old apple trees, one of which (I think about 1860) father estimated to be about 100 years old. This tree bore fruit for twenty years or more afterwards. This potash factory may have been the earliest industry of the new settlement of the Winthrop Company.

The first settlers, the Halletts, Crowells, Cornforths, Husseys, etc., were all from the same town on Cape Cod, and originally from the same locality in England – having certain peculiarities of dialect and manner.

The hamlet – it was hardly more than that, in my childhood – of West Waterville, was separated into two very distinct and sometimes hostile divisions – the Upper and Lower Mills. Each division had its little red schoolhouse; the furniture and even the doorposts and doors were ornamented by the rude carvings of unskilled hands. What a pity that the boyish tendency to cut and to carve had not been richly directed. We might have had a village of skilled carvers, instead of mere whittlers.

Up to the age of nine years, my boyish horizon was limited on the west by father's pasture and woods. The last house on the road, where I always loved to stop, was simply a oneroom with leanto and a loft reached by a ladder. This was the residence of Madison Soule. Returning east, there were the houses of Nahum Wilbur and Squire Hitchings – a man who knew more than anyone else in the community – and then the old Benson tavern, opposite the turn of the Belgrade road. There were no houses on that road till you came to Bainbridge Crowell's which was, if I remember rightly, out of our school district. East of the Tavern, beyond the hollow, was the house of Elder Hill, John Hubbard, and the new house of Dr,. North, and directly opposite, the house where I was born, with the store close by, and the rather pretentious colonial residence of Jonathan Coombs. Silas Bailey's house just beyond this, was built during my early childhood. Directly opposite this, on the corner, was B. C. Benson's carriage factory, and just below it, the blacksmith shop of Russell Benson. On the corner below this was the store of Samuel Kimball; then the gristmill of Silas Bailey and the tannery of Alfred Winslow.

Across the bridge, the blacksmith of Kenelm Blackwell, and the sawmill and chair factory of Thomas Baker. On the Sidney road, within the school district, were the houses of Cyrus Wheeler, Kenelm Pullen and David Munsey. On the east side were the houses of Daniel Lord, Kenelm Blackwell, and I think one or two others, whose names I do not recall. On the west side of the stream, on the little street leading from Kimball's store to what was afterwards Folsom's store, were the houses of Baker and Sheppard, and the shoe shop of David Davis.

On Church street, , after you passed the schoolhouse going north, was the residence of Mr. Coombs (Mrs.,. Boies) B. C. Benson, Alfred Winslow, Samuel Kimball, and then the church, then Union, now Universalist; at the turn of the road, the tavern and store of Guy Hubbard; beyond the turn Clark Stanley's Tavern and William Macartney.

On the Fairfield road were the houses of John Cornforth and Mr. Hale. Mr. Cornforth's store was at the corner – worth remembering now from the fact that one who was a clerk in his employ was one of four brothers who were representatives in Congress at the same time from four different states, and he was governor of Maine at the outbreak of the Civil War. I have three commissions with the signature of Israel Washburn, Jr.

I think there was a carding mill at the dam, but I am not certain. Below the Cascade was a scythe factory of Hale & Stevens,. Their whole output was sold and delivered from a one-horse wagon which traveled in the course of the year over the greater part of southern Maine and eastern New Hampshire.

The young man whom I knew who traveled with this outfit afterwards became the head of the Boston show firm of Field, Thayer & Whitcomb.

One quaint old house at the top if the steep bank of the river stands out in my memory, the name of the occupant stands out from my memory (Dexter Pullen). Mr. Lord built a hoe and axe factory in my childhood days which afterwards was Hubbard, Blake & Co.

From Church street west to the river was solid woods with the exception of one little patch of half an acre or so which they called the "wheat-field/" There we children used to go for picnics, near the Bates Mill.

One day a bear, driven from the woods of the northwest, was seen in these woods and the whole male adult population turned out to hunt the poor beast. He was finally shot under the lower bridge and his body was brought to the upper mills to lie in state, in the rear of Kimball's store. Our hired man, a great good-natured fellow, kindly offered to lead me down the hill to see the bear, but it took much persuasion and some gentle force to bring my little hand to touch the dead bear.

Freshets of the destructive sort were very rare on the stream but one spring at unusually high water the stone pillars under the grist mill were knocked out and the grist mill was floated almost to the lower bridge. Silas Bailey hunted among the ruins for a certain inside door and recovered it. On this were kept his accounts.

The post office was at the Upper Mills. When the democrats were in power, Mr. Coombs was postmaster and had his office in Mr. Kimball's store. Mr.

Kimball was his brother-in-law. When the Whigs were in, Father was postmaster. When I was about nine years old I made up the mail, of course under Father's oversight, and had it ready for the carrier. We had mail connection with Waterville twice a week. Every letter had to be marked paid five cents, or collect ten cents. After envelopes came in, they had to be sealed with wafers or sealing wax. The first stamp, 2 cts., had to be cut from the sheet with scissors.

The building of the railroad was a great event in the history of the little village. It spelled prosperity with a big P. The greater part of the laborers were Irish and boarded in the shanty, some of the more quiet sort preferred boarding in private families. We had a bunch of four or five at one house, and Mother provided slippers for them to put on before entering the house. If any of the boarders came in showing signs of intoxication a quiet warning the next morning prevented any repetition of the offense. To our sober and sedate New Englanders the frolics and occasional fights, at the shanty, were very scandalous.

We little dreamed that children of these wild Irish would rule our great cities, not only in the kitchen, but on the street and in the highest offices of the City Hall.

The greatest part of these laborers were honest and resented any trickery on the part of others.

One, a giant in size, had little appetite for work. His name was on the pay-roll and he proceeded to try his credit. Father furnished him a complete outfit […] by some of the men […] was already on the road walking to Waterville and […] by steamboat. Father followed and overtook him at the foot of […] Hill, and recovered every scrap […] to hat and handkerchief. The man had his old clothes on under the new. This was collecting debt without due process of law and it required two kinds of courage to do it.

There were some serious difficulties in railroad construction which would seem quite trivial at this day. For instance, there was a very deep quagmire in the rear of the home that father built, which seemed to resist all efforts to overcome. After a year of filling and pile driving the spring showed the piles leaving in all directions. It was then determined to fill the hole with dirt, but the process of wheel-barrow and dump cart was altogether too slow Gravel could be brought on the north side and a locomotive with flat cars was brought from Winthrop over the stage road.

When we boys saw the dust flying on the Belgrade Road, we went out to meet the coming stranger, and a wonderful sight it was. Twelve yoke of oxen drawing a very heavy wagon and on the wagon in diminished dignity stood the mighty locomotive, The Pathfinder. The hole was filled before frost came.

The first station agent was Mr. Tozier, but the duties did not occupy all of his time. He fitted up a photograph studio in the station. The process then was on polished silver, requiring long exposure. There had been before a studio in the Johnathan Coombs house.

Up to the time of the building of the railway most of the trade was barter. There had to be money for taxes, and a little for doctors and preachers. Wool pelts and furs brought cash, but hardly any other produce. Mr. Benson would pay his workmen out of the store as did the other employers, and we had a large box under the counter to hold the checks or orders. These were not sorted but held only in case of a dispute on the account. Some were written on paper, others on shavings, tan bark, birch bark, chips, etc.

Father was the first to pay our cash for country produce, beginning with beans and dried apples for the California trade. We packed the apples in molasses hogsheads, pounding and tramping them down as firmly as possible, for they were to go the long voyage round Cape Horn.

There was always some money to be handled. There was the big copper cent which disappeared when the copper was worth more than the coin. The bank notes were the greatest bother. We had to have a big counterfeit detector which gave us a list of all known counterfeits and broken banks, and we very frequently had to refer to this. Among the silver coins was a three cent piece which came in with the three cent postage stamp and went out with it.

The religious life of the community was centered in the Meetinghouse with occasional lectures and concerts week nights. For evening affairs each attendant was requested to bring a lamp or candle and evening services were announced as beginning at "early candle lighting,."

We had a Sunday school but it was not highly successful. Kenelm Blackwell was my teacher. He did not teach, but he made us commit to memory the first part of the Gospel according to St. John and I have since been profoundly thankful to him for having at my tongue's end this marvelous bit of philosophy and theology.

One great church enterprise was undertaken by the women, to furnish a bell for the church. I do not know how long it took them to raise the money, at least a year or two of quilting, knitting, cooking – and I well remember some marvelous crullers that were made by Mrs. Blackwell. The bell was purchased and raised into the tower. Clark Stanley was the chief engineer. The only casualty that occurred to mar this important achievement was in throwing out some of the scantlings from the belfry Clark Stanley's dog was killed – a real calamity to our boyish minds, for he was the inseparable companion of Mr. Stanley and was highly educated.

In this great enterprise, the dividing line between the Upper and Lower Mills was wiped off the map never to appear again.

I have already written of the little red school houses, in which pupils of all ages from four to twenty-one met, studied, absorbed and learned from each other – having some advantage over the later system of graded schools. But the reform started by Horace Mann was bound to spread. One of the teachers just before my time was Mr. Pennell. He left an impression on the community that was very lasting. He afterwards became the superintendent of Minnesota schools and long before he died was acknowledged to be one of the great educators in the country.

The public school was supplanted by a fall term of private school at the upper or lower schoolhouse. When it was at the lower schoolhouse, I would go with my sisters, following the trail thru the woods which is now Water Street.

This wood as far as Memorial hall was the property of David Coombs and when the doctor told him he could prolong his life by going to Florida he decided to sell. He surveyed it off into lots but as there was not a brisk market in lots, he put the sale in the form of a lottery and all the neighbors in their desire to help him, laid aside their scruples and bought tickets. My father, who was opposed to gambling in any form, bought a ticket for each member of the family. Sister Sarah drew a lot to which there was no sale for many years.

Before the passage of the prohibitory law, there were two licensed places where liquors were sold. They both stopped when prohibition came in. In the early years of enforcement there were some queer scenes. Quite a quantity of liquor was spilled and ran down the gutter in front of David Davis' shoemakers shop, and I remember seeing some of the neighbors dipping it up in their tin cups and drinking to their satisfaction.

One man in Rome (Walter Warren) was determined to defy the law and threatened dire results to any officer who attempted to put him out of business. Frank Crowell, a son of Uncle Hiram Crowell, was deputy sheriff and armed with a warrant, he arrested the fire eater and brought him to West Waterville for trial. There was no jail in the village and as Father was one of Mr. Crowell's bondsmen, he allowed the prisoner the privilege of sleeping in the guest room of his new house. There were two keepers, Loren Corson and Thos. Baker, both prohibitionists, but for such important duty they were provided with a private bottle. During the night, both got sound asleep and the sound awoke the prisoner. He saw his opportunity and took advantage of it – not by flight or attempt to escape – but by crawling out of bed and under it. Corson was the first to awake and seeing the bed empty he shook his partner, saying, "Tom, Tom, he is gone."

And the prisoner had his laugh.

Isaac Bates kept a little shop where he sold candy, cakes and soft drinks. Once he experimented in a batch of strong beer. I was offered a taste of it but I could not see how any one could drink such stuff. Some of the young men, however, seemed to like it and drank several glasses each. I thin Mr. Bates learned that sort of traffic had better cease.

One of the features of the simple life of the village was the annual visit of the traveling tinker – when all the pans and pails were mended up . He was a welcome guest, not only for his useful work but for his exceptional qualities of heart and mind. He was a singer of strange ditties, highly interesting to us children, could preach forcibly, and talk entertainingly. His children or grandchildren are and have been very successful Chiropodists in Boston and St. Louis.

In mid-winter we had other welcome visitors. An adventurous dealer would bring from the coast a pung load of clams, which meant for us in the interior a delicious feast. Lobsters and salt water fish were also a welcome variant in our winter diet.

Father used to put in cold storage sometimes a hundred sheep and lambs. The cold storage was effected by first freezing and then packing in snow.

You may get some idea of what you have gained in the way of a larger and easier life, of what you have lost of the more leisurely simple life. On the whole, let us think we have advanced into a broadened outlook, a larger partnership in the worldwide humanity, and with that broader outlook and feeling of partnership, a sense of responsibility for the welfare of all. Without this, luxury is ruinous. With it, a going on and on to higher ideals and greater achievements.

Readers of the Journal will feel grateful to Miss Smiley for furnishing such interesting matter for these articles. It has made possible two illustrated stories instead of one, and will be the means of preserving much historical data for future reference. More could easily be said of this good old town and some other time this will be done. It is a town where the blood of the pioneers may still be found and where the virtues of a former age are still preserved.

S. C. Bateman.