

# THE GENERAL STORE



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NEWSLETTER OF THE RALSTON HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

SUMMER 2006

## Wilma Sagurton's Life Growing Up in Mendham

Wilma Sagurton was born in 1916 and has spent more than fifty years in the preservation of historic sites and artifacts both in Randolph and in Mendham. She has her own museum with artifacts she has gathered over the years. The original interview for this story was conducted by a student member of the Landmarks Committee in 1996.

Wilma's family first came to the Mendham area in the middle of the 1700s when the Lenape Indians were still living there. Levi Lewis was her great, great, great, great, grandfather. He built his own house, three dams, a forge, a grist mill, a sawmill, planted a large orchard and started a tan yard. At the forge, Levi worked iron from the Lewis Mine located across Indian Brook. Remnants of the mine and forge are still in evidence along what is now called India Brook. The name change probably occurred when a map maker copied the name incorrectly.

There was a kiln erected to process lime that was used to sweeten the acid, glacial soil. The lime was also used to make whitewash, a mixture used to paint basement and stable walls. Lime also is an aid in smelting iron ore.

Leather goods produced by a tan yard included harnesses, bridles, leggings, shoes, whips and more. The mills were built in such a way that the farmers would turn off onto the Mill Road that went between the tan yard and the mills to unload either the lumber they needed to have sawed or to unload their grain which would be ground (this as called grist). In payment for grinding the grain into oatmeal, cornmeal, or flour, the miller kept a percentage for himself.

The Lewis family owned all of the land in Combs Hollow. Their cows used the grain and hay that was grown



in the fields and their sheep supplied wool for work clothing, bedding and blankets for both the humans and horses. Flax was grown and processed into linen for dresses, petticoats, underwear, sheets and table cloths. The women knew how to do all of these operations from beginning to end. They raised the flax and processed the flax and wool to be woven into yard goods. There were no stores in the area so everyone was nearly self-sufficient.

The only place to go was to church, which was to The First Presbyterian Church in Succasunna. Wilma's great, great grandparents are listed as founders of the Mt. Freedom Presbyterian Church.

There was no road department at that time so if something needed to be done, the men would get on their horses with the necessary tools and do the job. There was no electric power until the 1920s and only one neighbor had a phone. There were no cars so you had to walk or ride a horse or hitch up a wagon.

All the farmers kept a large supply of wood to burn in the fireplaces and stoves. They also built their own fences, their own chicken coops, outhouses, smokehouses, and

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## RHA Annual Meeting

Please join us for the Annual Meeting of the Ralston Historical Association which will be held at 1 pm on Sunday, July 9 at the General Store which is on Rt. 24 at the intersection of Roxiticus Road. Trustees and officers will be elected and a review of last year's accomplishments and plans for this year will be discussed. The trustees nominated for re-election from this year's Class of 2006 are Rose Carlin, Judy Craig and Jeff Purcell.

## General Store Museum Re-opens

The 2006 museum season began on Memorial Day and will continue through mid-October. The museum is open on Sundays and holidays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. The museum docent is Paula Duer.

anything that was necessary. They knew how to do carpentry, mason work and they also practiced elementary veterinary medicine.

There were no funeral parlors and the undertaker did his work in the homes of the deceased. When Wilma was a child her grandfather died, and the children went snooping around. They could hear the clanking of the buckets and the thumping of wooden horses that would support the coffin. The houses were built with one door placed in such a way that a coffin could be successfully gotten through the door. Funerals were always at home. The pallbearers carried the coffin down to the horse drawn hearse which took it and the procession to the cemetery at Mt. Freedom Presbyterian Church. The family plot is marked by a polished gray granite obelisk, which is the only one there.

Wilma's parents were David Minard Lewis and Anna Mae Mockridge. Wilma's mother nursed many family members and neighbors through illnesses, but in order to do this she had to have help with the house chores. When nursing care was needed, she traveled via a horse and buggy in all kinds of weather.

Wilma's parents built their home on Combs Hollow Road. They dug out the cellar and cemented up the basement walls using natural granite for stone. They anchored the sills and put up the framing. The roof boards were wide and long and Wilma was able to salvage some before the house was demolished in 1996. One of the important chores was taking the milk before it spoiled to the creamery. The neighborhood dairy farmers formed a cooperative to pool their resources and increase their income. They built a creamery on Park Avenue across from Bryant's Pond. This was a money product for the family.

David built a smokehouse for ham and bacon and near it was the meat house which was never painted in order to keep chemicals away from the meat. When her father butchered their own pigs and calves, the meat was cut into chops and steaks and was smoked so that it would keep. Her mother even cut the meat into strips for canning. Deer and pheasant were dressed and hung up to freeze in cold weather.

Wilma's mother made the girls several dresses. They had a garter vest to hold up the brown stockings and wore high top brown shoes. She made their coats, hats, mittens and scarves which were hand crocheted.

Cooking was a difficult process since the stove had to be maintained at a suitable temperature. In cold weather this could be done more easily than in the warm weather.

The chimneys had to be cleaned often so her father would cut a red cedar tree the same size as the flue. He dangled the tree in the chimney, pulling it up and down to brush out the soot.

There was no kindergarten at the school on Old Brookside Road so her mother taught them to read before they went to school. The school bus was driven by Mrs. George Clark. It was a red and gold stagecoach pulled by a team of farm horses. When the horses were returned, the harnesses were left on so they could work in the fields.

On the first day of school each of the children received a green lead pencil which was not sharpened, a ruled pad, a spelling blank for spelling tests, a ruler and whatever books were suitable for your grade.

The two room schoolhouse on Old Brookside Road had four grades in each room. There were big rolling doors between the rooms which were rolled back the first thing in the morning after the coats and hats were hung up on the racks. They had a Bible reading, the Lord's Prayer and two songs from the "Golden Book of Favorite Songs" in the morning. After this the big doors were rolled shut and lessons began.

Lunch of homemade bread and jelly, cake, fruit, and spring water for a drink was carried in a tin box or maybe a bag. The older students went across the road to fill up a bucket with nice cool spring water which was a privilege. In the winter when the brook froze, they had to use an ax to break the ice and poke the dipper down to fill up the bucket. There was no electricity and the school was heated by a coal furnace in the back of the classroom. The teacher had to make a fire every morning before school began.

The outhouses were in back of the building - one for girls and one for boys. The school playground was beside the school and they would often play stick ball or tag. A favorite game was jacks, which was played on a concrete slab. The school's library was in a dusty closet and every Friday the door was unlocked and the children took turns selecting two books to be read during the week.

The winters in those days were very hard with lots of snow. If the snow was too deep the children used the sleigh and horse to go to school. Sometimes the mothers would warm a brick in the oven and wrap it up to take in the sleigh to keep warm.

Long before the rural electrification programs in the 1920s Wilma's parents imported a Delco generator that burned a gallon of gasoline at a time. It was connected to three banks of glass batteries, that had to be charged a couple of times a week. They set up a pole and a wire

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## Tree Falls on General Store

In February, a weekend of heavy winds resulted in a Norway Spruce tree falling on and perforating the roof of the General Store. The tree was removed and the roof was repaired.

that went to the cow barn. People came from all over to see why these darn fools thought that cows needed a light to give milk. Wilma's mother got a plan from Delco Company and she strung electric wires to each room of the house. A single naked bulb hung from each room, but it was better than kerosene lamps and candles.

They visited a doctor by the name of Degroot who practiced out of his home in Mendham. As time went on he stopped making house calls and hired a chauffeur to take him to his patients. His eyesight failed but he continued to mix medicines by touch and smell and he was never known to make a mistake.

Wilma's parents were in their 40s when they married and she always remembered her father with white whiskers which he faithfully shaved every Sunday morning. He would set up his small shaving mirror in the middle of the kitchen, drop his suspenders, take off his shirt, and pour hot water from the tea kettle into his shaving cup. He would strop his straight edge. His shaving brush of beaver hair was worked on a cake of soap until lather was formed. Everyone had to clear out and leave him alone so he was not disturbed during his shave.

Neighbors did not visit much because there was not time. There was an occasional party which was held at one of her father's camps down by Indian Brook. Everyone brought food and they were even able to play tunes on the Edison VICTROLA with cylindrical records. These camps were also rented in the summer for extra income.

It was Wilma's great joy to be in the hayfield at the barrack when the men and horses brought the wagons to unload. One of their horses named Judy had to pull the rope that raised the hay fork up and down. This picked up the hay from the wagon and dumped it inside. A barrack is a roof on four poles which was raised or lowered with a jack and held in place by iron spikes. When it was full, it would be high and as it was emptied during the winter, it would be lowered. Each of the horses had its own stall and had to be brushed and wiped down. They needed water, oats and hay. Wilma loved horses and was given one which she named Queenie. She always felt that having your own horse was equivalent to getting your driver's license.

The mailman came every day by a horse and buggy. He brought the mail and the "Newark Evening News." If Wilma wanted to read the newspaper, she had to make sure that it was put back exactly the way she found it so as not to anger her father.

Another contact with the outside world came to be an Atwater Kent Radio. The family would sit down to supper together and listened to the radio. Gabriel Heater was the

newsman at that time and when he was on, there was total silence.

When the towns of Mendham and Morristown joined together to form a water company, it was decided that their Combs Hollow area would be ideal for a reservoir and all the farmers were forced out of their homes. The reservoir was never built and the area is now on the State and National Register of Historical Places.

## House Tour Huge Success

It was a lovely fall day and more than two hundred visitors came to visit historic homes in Mendham's Ralston district. On Sunday, October 16, 2005 the Ralston Historical Association hosted a house tour of eight homes in the Ralston area. The homes represented a time period from the early 1700s to the 1920s. The house tour was part of "Ralston Day" which also included a tour of the newly renovated Ralston Cider Mill and lunch sponsored by the Ralston Fire Department.

Featured homes were John Ralston's Manor House, the Ralston Mill House, the Millworker's House, the Leddell House, Nesbitt House, the Sears-Roebuck House, Pine Hill, the Bank House and the General Store. The Manor House is one of Morris County's first mansions built in 1781. The Mill House is the original Logan mill that ground grain for the Continental forces. Hugh Nesbitt, a local businessman, built the Nesbitt house with its banked barn. In the 1800s the Millworker's House was built as a tenant house for local workers. The Leddell House was a wedding gift to Samuel Leddell and his bride. Pine Hill dates back to the original settlers of this area. The Bank House is an excellent example of the many homes built into the rolling hills of western New Jersey. The Sears-Roebuck House is a classic example of the 1920s catalog homes. Ticket sales benefit the activities of the Ralston Historic Association and the upkeep and maintenance of the General Store.

The owners of these homes were extremely gracious in joining the Historical Association in celebrating the history of their homes and opening them to the public. The Ralston Historic Association extends heartfelt thanks for their enthusiastic response and hospitality to:

*Russell C. Buchanan*

*Wood Huntley and Beirne Donaldson*

*Matthew and Teresa Finlay*

*Ben and Valerie Horowitz*

*Craig J. Leach and Sandra Sayre*

*Georges de Pompignan and Nancy Rodrigues*

*Ralph and Pat Rhodes*

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# THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

BY JEFF PURCELL



The RHA's 2005-6 Season ended with our very successful house tour in October. We raised over \$5000 for the Association. One comment that we heard was that we should do these tours more often. Plans are in the works for a similar type of event next year – but with a twist. We'll keep you posted.

After reading about the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year of Mendham Borough I started to think about how Mendham had changed since my own arrival in town as a teenager in the summer of 1969, when Mendham still had a decidedly country feel. When I think of my first impression of the town, I always think of the all the old maple trees lining the street. It's what made Mendham so different from other towns. Another thing you noticed was that most of the original buildings were still standing and had not been altered to any great extent. Thankfully, looking up and down East and West Main Street today, almost all of the buildings are still standing that I remember from the early 1970s. But while the buildings remain, the businesses have changed considerably.

On West Main Street, gone are the Mendham Tailor, Sunoco Station, Jimmy's Clothing Store, Guerin's Market and the Bull and Bear Antiques store. The yellow Cape Cod building across from West Field housed a small restaurant called the William Penn that served dinner - nothing fancy, just simple homemade food like baked chicken or pork chops. It has been gone for many years – replaced by real estate agencies and more recently a law office.

On East Main Street, gone are the Ward Sands furniture store, the Village Barn clothing store and a BP gas

station where Banknorth now stands. The Gunther Motors building was lost to fire several years ago and was rebuilt as Audi of Mendham. An Exxon station used to sit alongside Gunther's. Across the street, a long brown shingled row house stood where the Peapack Bank now stands. The old firehouse, a very handsome two-story building on East Main Street was disassembled and part of it moved to the new fire house behind East Main Street. Soon, the old Freeman Ford building will be gone like its neighbor - Moro's gas station and repair shop – now the Car Wash. Older residents may recall that before Dante's there was the Mendham Village Pub and before that - Joe's Bar and Grill.

The Village Shopping Center is always changing to keep up with the times. Gone are an appliance store, Bantam, Bantam Fabrics, Wisteria House, Mendham Bakery, Burrini's Meat Market, a florist, a travel agency and a fish market. The shopping center itself appears to be undergoing a change. Stone is replacing the wood siding that replaced wood cedar shakes and so on.

I'm sure many readers have their own memories of Mendham that stretch back before my time in 1969. It is the goal of our Association to preserve the memories and remnants of the past as best we can. We appreciate the continued support of our current members and look forward to welcoming interested residents of town into our association. Don't forget to visit the Ralston General Store this summer through mid-October from 2 to 5 p.m. on Sundays and Holidays. Our special exhibit is called "Early Kitchen" and Paul Duer, our cheerful docent will be happy to give you a tour.

## From the Collection

The tool pictured is a home made sauerkraut stomper on display at the Ralston General Store Museum.

Sauerkraut was an important staple of early American menus. Easily grown cabbage could be processed into a preserved form called sauerkraut (sour cabbage) that would provide a nutritious feature of winter menus.

To produce sauerkraut, the cabbage was shredded and placed in a container. Salt was added to a layer of the shredded cabbage and then it was stomped for compaction, sometimes in fifty gallon wooden barrels. Over time the cabbage fermented to a preserved form.

Accounts of early American life indicate that the stomping was sometimes done by barefoot children.



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