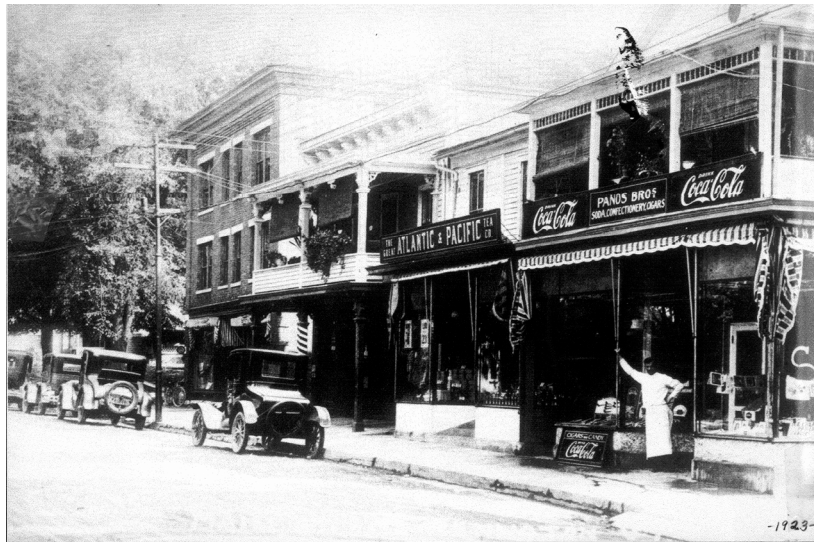


CHAPTER 2

The Village

According to a recent town report, our village was originally called Haviland's Hamlet until 1776 when it was discovered that Mr. Haviland was a Tory. His son-in-law, Mr. Sage, made the exposure; the village promptly became Sages City, which it continued to be called until 1828, when a post office was established by the government. North Bennington, Vermont, as is has been called ever since, covers only 2.1 square miles. In 1923, it consisted of Main Street running north and south. This was a series of three hills and was about a mile long from Grandview cemetery (which actually was in Shaftsbury) to the



This is upper Main Street in the summer of 1923. That's Pete Panos leaning against his store. If you look carefully past the A&P store, you can see the striped pole of Jack Clark's Barber Shop.

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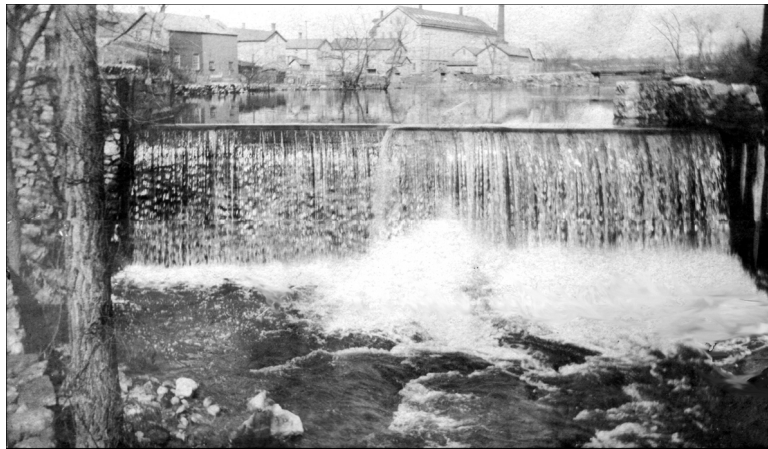
library on lower Main Street and then continuing down to Water Street past W.H. White's Kiddy Kar Company to the town line in Hinsdaleville. Turning obliquely off of the main street were Greenwich Street (we called it Shoe Lane) and Hawkes Avenue; Depot, Bank and Houghton Streets; EZ Lane (now Sage Street); Prospect and West Street, Hillside Street, and the River Road. The east-west axis was the railroad line that ran through the northern edge of the village in upper Main Street.

This was many years before the days of shopping malls. In fact, the word "mall" only meant "a shaded walk in St. James Park, London," and we had never heard the word. But on both sides of "upper" and "lower" Main Street, we had shops to supply all our needs. On upper Main Street was a small park with a fountain commemorating all Veterans of World War I. Next to the park was Panos' ice cream store (and penny candy, too). Ed Simonds ran the A&P store next to Jack Clark's Barber Shop, and next to it was the Morrissey short-order restaurant that my mother called the Greasy Spoon. An alley separated these shops from the Simmons brick block, which was built by my grandfather in 1903 and held the new post office and Dick Dwyer's Meat Market. Apartments—or as we called them "tenements"—were on the second and third floors. The next building was a house built in 1948 by Warren Dutcher. It was built entirely of cobblestones, and Mr. Dutcher raffled it off, selling tickets at \$1.00 each. Paul Shuffleton of Arlington held the winning ticket. I have often wondered how many tickets Mr. Dutcher sold. Across from the Simmons homestead, the next houses then were Dr. Tobin's, the W.R. White house, the Bake Shop, the Bake Shop house, and the railroad station.

On the opposite side of the street and across from the park were the bank and Meagher's Grocery Store (later to become Powers and Robinson), the only place open on Sunday nights, and the only place to buy a Bermuda onion. The Meagher homestead was next door and Stella "Somebody"—I think her name was Chevlin—ran a drug store for a few years. Next up the street was a gas station run by Jimmy Huntington (he also sold a

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vile new drink in a bottle called Moxie), and next to it was our shop, H.C. Simmons Sons, followed by the Simmons homestead where Nanny, Aunt Marcia and Uncle Jack lived. Next came our house and the “ell” next door, Aunt Mammie and Uncle Bernie’s house, followed by our three tenement houses and the railroad tracks. In back of these houses was a house and barn that we rented to the Sinay family.



Paran Creek Falls

Lower Main Street was dominated by the millpond and falls of Paran Creek, which, in the early 1800s supplied water power for the mills located on its shores. This was the site also of the original town settled by Joseph Haviland, but the mills and many original buildings were washed away in a horrible flood in 1852. Now it was a docile stream with several falls that were bounded by partially abandoned buildings until it reached the falls at the thriving Cushman Company.

On this part of Main Street, our needs were supplied by Shepard’s Store (now Powers Store), Marty Percey’s newspaper store, and Jimmy Powers Dry Good Store, our brick McCullough library, and the McCullough fire station.

In walking to school or church, or really anywhere in North Bennington, we seldom used the sidewalks. A maze of footpaths

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going “crosslots” created the shortest paths to anywhere, and all kids and some adults used them. It was many years before I actually walked down Main Street on our beautiful marble sidewalks to go to school or the Congregational Church. Now I’ve noticed that the sidewalks have been torn up and replaced with concrete, and I wonder if the footpaths have survived.

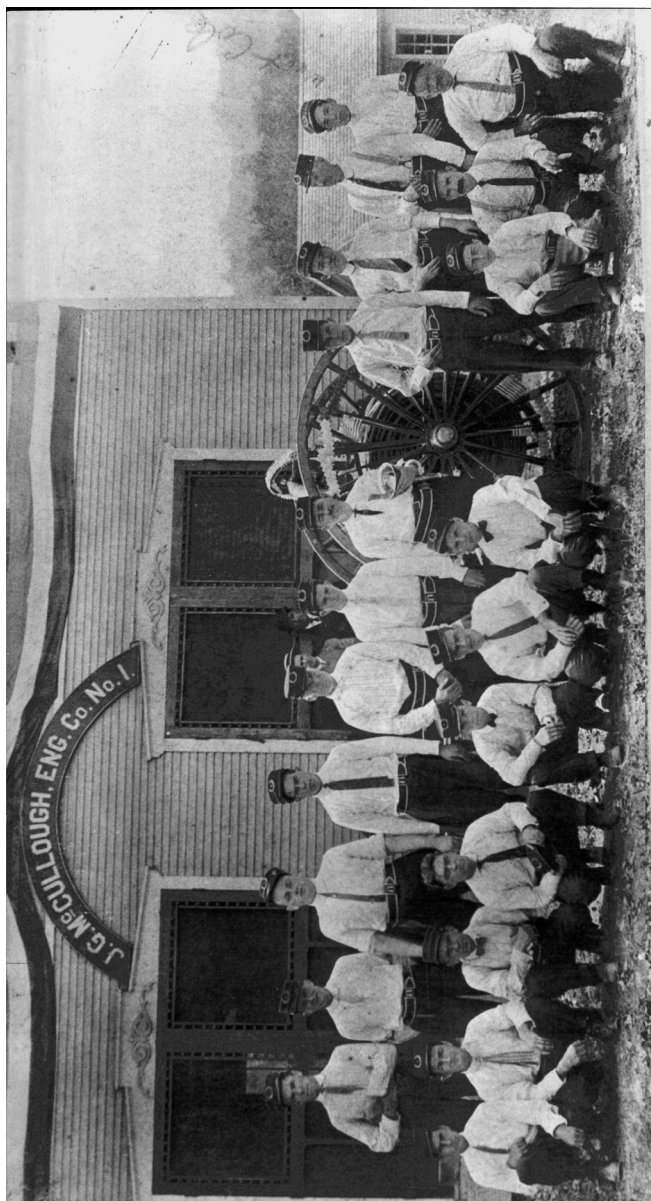


*Looking south on Main Street: notice our white marble sidewalks
& the Bake Shop at far left.*

For me, it was a longer walk down the hill to Shepard’s Store, but I was always eager to go with Mother when we needed oysters. I was intrigued by the large metal tub on legs that stood outside the door. It held raw oysters (only in months with an R, of course) with no refrigeration. It was a ‘serve-yourself’ deal with a scoop to fill your cardboard carton. You just hoped the temperature wasn’t too hot and the oysters weren’t too old. Actually, no one worried about such things, and the oysters tasted much better than today.

In addition to these stores, we had Dewey Bronson’s meat truck, which stopped at our door once a week with a great array of meat kept cool with chunks of ice. The rag and newspaperman, who must have been the original recycler, came once a

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The volunteer firemen in 1914--ten years before I was born--but not much had changed in 1923! Left to right;

Back row: Tom Nash, William Pepus, Frank Welch, Art Barber, Jim Powers (Tom's father), Bernard Powers, Frank Powers (Chick), William Barber, Bob Burke, John Walsh, Walt Cole (my uncle).

Front row: _____?, George White, Mike Howe, Buddy Powers, Willie Howe, George Campbell, Tom

Lisbee, Al King, Jim Howe, Tom Mahar. In background, Tom Harlan (in derby hat).

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month. He paid us for old newspapers and rags or swapped for tin pans from his rickety old truck. Phoebe Bump and others peddled berries, produce, preserves, and horseradish all year. And we knew that spring was just around the corner when the scissors grinder with his pet monkey came to our door to sharpen our knives and scissors for the year.

George Mattison and his horse delivered our milk every morning. In the early years, we dipped the milk from a big can in the back of the wagon, but as things got more sophisticated, the milk was delivered in glass milk bottles. The washed empties were put out each night to be replaced by full bottles early in the morning. I don't suppose there was any sterilization of those bottles. There was no pasteurization or homogenization either; so thick, rich cream would rise to the top of the bottle. In the winter, it froze and popped up out of the bottle like a top hat. Licking it gave us an early version of ice cream. I still remember waking up to the sound of those clanking bottles as George went from door to door, and the unattended horse went clip-clopping down the street to the next corner.

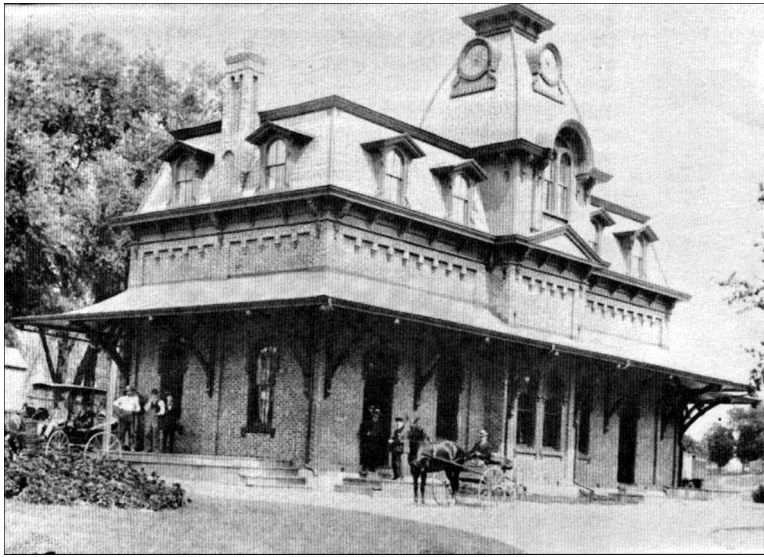
Until 1927, we had excellent trolley car connections; we could hop on a trolley to go not only to Bennington and Hoosick Falls, New York, but also all the way to Northampton, Massachusetts. However, in that year spring floods wiped out all bridges and tracks and the whole service stopped running. It was the end of an era for most people, but for the Simmons boys, the empty trolley car barn became a great source of exploration. The brick car barn still stands at the intersection of Bank Street and the railroad tracks. After a few years, a bus line was established to Bennington, but it was no match for the trolley service as family cars gradually became the mode of transportation.

Halfway down Main Street from the cemetery was our bustling railroad station. Each day two passenger trains ran to New York and two to Montreal, so we could go to New York City, Montreal, Canada, and the "whole" world. In addition, there were "milk" trains (taking milk from the farms to the city each day except Sunday) and there were freight trains, "switchers," and

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shuttle trains to Bennington and Hoosick Junction. Fred Welling once said that there were sixteen passenger train movements each day. It was a pretty active place for a small village.

We could set our clocks by those trains. When we were swimming at the “Big Pond” in the late afternoon and heard the Green Mountain Flyer pulling into the station, we headed for home. It was four o’clock. Needless to say, the action around the station was a big part of our lives, and because of the proximity of our property, we knew them all—the engineers, the firemen, the porters, and the conductors. Sometimes the engineer would give us a ride up the tracks when they “switched” or filled the engine with water from the high water tower in the freight yard.



North Bennington Station

But mostly we just sat under the big elm tree that separated our property from the tracks and watched. There was something awesome and powerful about those engines. They belched cinders, smoke, a sulfur smell, and a lot of hissing steam and noise. There was always a small crowd of people watching the action as the trains rolled in. The conductor was first down the

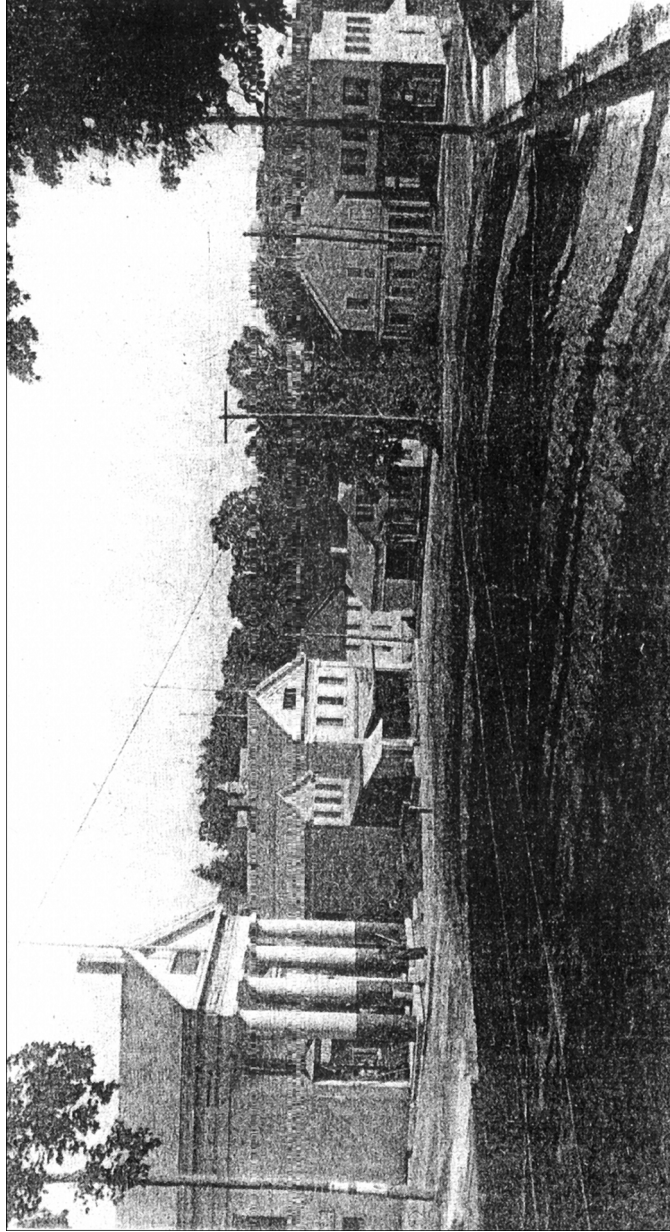
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steps with his metal footstool for the ladies, whom he would help down one by one. Then, after the porters helped the departing passengers aboard, the stationmaster would ceremoniously look at the big watch that hung from a gold chain across his ample stomach. At his nod, the conductor shouted, “AHW. . . LLLL. . . ABOARD,” and they would huff and puff and chug-chug-chug faster and faster away from the station on their way to a world that we could only imagine.

Back in the old days, business had been brisk and the village was thriving, so we had a splendid brick bank built in 1864 by Trenor Park. It held a large public hall on the second floor. In 1923, this was used for meetings and dances, and this was where we went to the movies on Saturday afternoon. Our movies were silent, except for the piano player, who played background music to embellish what was happening on the screen. Our neighbor Clara White played the piano, and sometimes I was allowed to sit on her bench, which was really close to the action. *Rin-Tin-Tin*, a big favorite, was a movie about a big German shepherd. I never tired of seeing him rescue a damsel in distress just in the nick of time as the pianist’s hands raced up and down the keyboard. WOW! What excitement! And, of course, we rolled in the aisles over “Our Gang” or “The Little Rascals,” as they are now called. The big kid in the series was Spanky McFarland. I treasured his autograph, which Aunt Carolyn sent to me when she visited in California.

Residential telephones were nonexistent and communication was by a note sent through the mail. In dire circumstances, we could use the telephone across the street at the Crawford Bakery. Then, of course, to contact people from out of town, we could use the telegraph at the railroad station. When I was about six years old, we had a telephone installed in our house, so our phone was the curiosity of the neighborhood and it never ceased to amaze everyone. Our number was “135 ring six.” There were six people on our line, so we were supposed to pick up only when it rang six times. However, the sport of the day was

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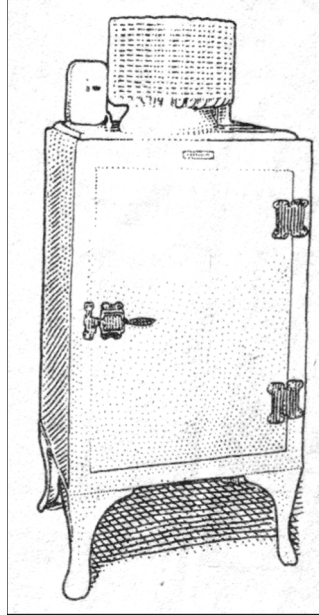


Lincoln Square; Shepard's Store on left

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“listening in” on other conversations. I was cured quickly one day when I lifted the receiver ever so carefully to hear Edith McCarthy say, “Harriet Simmons, hang up that phone!” I thought the darned thing had eyes too.

When I was first born, Mother cooked on a kerosene stove, but about 1927 we bought a new electric one. However, Nanny kept her kerosene stove operating in her house because “you never know.” When the flood of 1927 cut off all electricity for days, she was able to cook for us all. She predicted that these newfangled things would never last and we began to wonder. But before many years, we had an electric refrigerator. It was a General Electric with a big coil on top. There were no more blocks of ice and no more dripping ice pans, but how did it stay cold? Again, we were amazed.



Between 1920 and 1933, parties were prolific for our parents. This was the Roaring Twenties and the era of Prohibition. The government had forbidden the manufacture, transportation, and sale of intoxicating liquor. But, as with youth in all societies, defiance was the rule and how to beat the law was the goal. There were bootleggers and speakeasys and recipes for bathtub gin. Whether or not my family broke the law I do not know. I do know that they danced the Charleston, had costume parties, progressive dinners, and picnics. Any holiday was an excuse for a party, and Mother was the belle. She had wavy auburn hair, brown eyes, a bubbly personality, and she played the piano. Whenever she played “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” “My Sweetheart’s the Man in the Moon,” or any of the other hits of the era, people would gather around the piano and sing, some

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Is Mother pulling Uncle Bernie's hair?

1927: "Come as a Baby" party at our house. Back row, L to R: Wilbur Carroll, Jack Simmons, Carl Mattison, Poppy White. Middle Row: Chubby Simmons, Bernice Simmons, Marge Simmons, Mrs. Mattison, Marian White, Mrs. and Mr. Howe, Evelyn Payne. Front Row: Mad Simmons, Marcia Simmons, Wells White, Mrs. Carroll, Miss Payne, Nelson Payne.

accompanying with their ukuleles or kazoos. A kazoo was an instrument for non-musicians that amplified the sound of humming. Mother's favorite short party dress was made of pink chiffon covered from top to bottom with crystal beads. I'm certain Zelda never looked as great.

According to my Aunt Ellen, before meeting my father, my mother was engaged to a state trooper, who was very handsome. His name was Chester Johnson and he lived in Schenectady. But she met my father at a dance, they fell in love—and that was the end of Chester Johnson.

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Frederick Merriam Simmons, my father

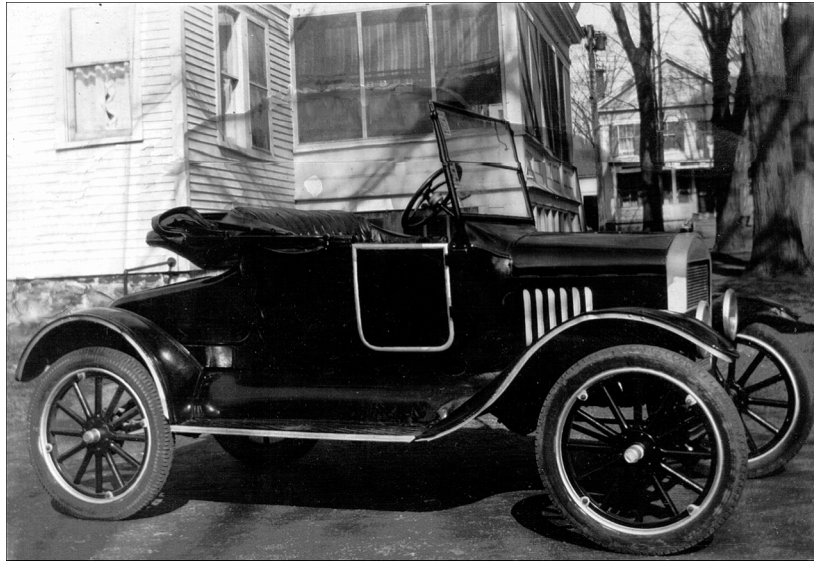
We didn't need a car, but we always had one for the three families, and we took turns using it a week at a time. For what? To go to Bennington on Saturday night to eat popcorn from Pop McGurn's wagon while we watched the people go by; for our many picnics; for going berry picking; getting to the Barnum and Bailey circus at Morgan's field in Bennington; and for Sunday drives to visit our many relatives.

We looked forward to these Sunday outings, which seemed to be spontaneous. Not many people had telephones, so our arrivals were not expected. However, the welcomes we received were genuine, the food was plentiful, and we loved seeing cousins and second cousins, aunts and great aunts up and down the county: the Galushas (Nanny's family) in Shaftsbury, the Squires (Mother's family) in East Arlington, the Remingtons (Mother's oldest sister) in Bennington, and the Sheldons (Simmons' in-laws) in Dorset.

Living in such close proximity, there must have been family feuds, but we were blissfully unaware of them. These things were best not disclosed to children, and I suspect my sweet, gentle grandmother ruled the family with an iron hand and would not

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tolerate dissension anyway. So we continued to grow up in LaLa Land, and it was lovely.



The Model T in back of Uncle Jack's porch (Tobin house in background).

For many years the only doctor in town was Dr. Tobin, who lived across the street from my grandmother. His office was in the front room in his house. There was no waiting room or nurse or any papers to be filled out. It really wasn't necessary because the doctor made house calls every day to check on you if you were ill. Otherwise, when you had an ache or pain, you just walked in. If he wasn't there, you wandered back in the house and usually found him slouched back in his easy chair, smoking a cigar and listening to a ball game on the radio.

His daughter Lucille, who was my friend, nicknamed him Bunny, which was what we all called him. As a special treat, he would take us with him when he made his rounds at the new Putnam Memorial Hospital in Bennington. My favorable impression of this wonderful new facility was based on the fact that Miss Baker, the revered supervisor of nurses, had a talking parrot.

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Lucille and I spent many hours on her “side lawn” making houses with leaves. We raked leaves to make a floor plan, then made doll-sized furniture with burdock blossoms. The crowning touch was ten beautiful tiny Oriental rug samples loaned to us by Lucille’s mother, Anna, whom I always called Auntie Tobin. We graduated from the leaf house to a room in the Tobin barn that we called the playhouse. I recall that we constantly cleaned the place with a broom, though we must have also “played house,” which was the activity for little girls. One day, I was severely scolded for taking my father’s “Flit” gun—the latest device for



Allen, “Hyatt,” Lucille, & Art on the Tobin “side lawn.”

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killing all insects—to get rid of the spiders in the playhouse. “Quick, Henry, the Flit” was a household slogan and seemed the logical answer to a playhouse insect problem as well. However, my parents did not share my point of view.

Aunt Millie (one of Mother’s older sisters) and Uncle Walter Cole lived on Greenwich Street. This was one of the streets that lay within the town of Shaftsbury but was in the village of North Bennington. They had an acre of land, a house and small barn, a cow, several chickens, and a vegetable garden, but no indoor plumbing. The house was heated by a wood-burning parlor stove; all cooking was done on the big iron wood-burning range in the kitchen. Water was heated here, too. Sometimes Mother would take us up to their house when Aunt Millie made her butter in an old-fashioned churn. We would have hot toast with salty fresh “farmers” butter and usually pickled pigs feet—it was so good!

One snowy winter day, my mother convinced Art Cole (Uncle Walter’s brother who lived next door) to hitch up his horse to the cutter (a sleigh) and let Mother borrow it to drive my little brother and me around town. The roads were not salted in those days and the snow was hard-packed, so we had easy sleighing. It was so exciting to slide along with the bells on the horses’ harnesses jingling, with the snow biting our cheeks, and to see the expression of confidence on our mother’s face as she drove the horse. We tended to forget—if we ever knew—that Mother was born before the days of automobiles, and horses were the only means of transportation in her youth. Anyway, it was a memorable day and my last ride in a bona fide “cutter.”

Mother’s younger sister lived on Hall Street. It was a new street, mostly occupied by young families who were friends of our parents. It was a short walk from our house through the hedgerow in back of the shop, past Bud Norton’s vegetable garden and the White apartment house, and across Bank Street; then, a short walk on the marble sidewalk, past Amy Surdam’s beautiful tulip garden and across her new concrete driveway to a beaten path across an empty lot near the Vetelle house. I then crossed School Street near Sabina Howes’ house. Walking the

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length of Hall Street in my memory, I can remember each family—Nora Stanley, our fifth and sixth grade fearsome but memorable teacher; the Willards; Crawfords; Paynes; Aunt Nee and Uncle Grange; the Whitmans. Across the street were the Jolivettes, Miss May Weir, and the Woods.



Upper Main Street, 1919—notice “cutter” & horse coming down the hill.

Mr. Wood, the principal of our school, lived across from Nora Stanley with his wife and daughter Patty. One day Mrs. Wood, hoping to impress the locals, gave a very formal luncheon party. It was impressive until teenager Patty served the lemon

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meringue pie. From the kitchen, Mrs. Wood's booming voice shouted, "Put the points toward them!" The Woods went on to greener pastures, but Mrs. Wood left me with a social grace that still haunts me whenever I serve pie.

For an era in which life was slow and easy—at least in retrospect—there was a compelling need in our town to shorten names or use nicknames. Obviously, this was not to save time, but seemed to be a better way of identification. Really, who would be caught calling Frederick Merriam Simmons, my father, by his full name? As a young boy, he was blond, a little plump, and rosy-cheeked, so he became Chubby. I can understand this, but then we had Gooly Powers, Dumpy Moxley, Jelly White, Hornet Simmons, Curly Fitzgerald, Stubby Green, Skunk Martin, Moe Salmon, Punk Sinay, Blossom Welch—the list is endless. How these names evolved we'll never know, but they stuck with their owners for the rest of their lives. I daresay that most people in the town didn't know the real name of Diddle Shanahan.

And so, this was the world that I was born into.