THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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See Editor's Note at the end of The Bulletin about the numbering of issues.

Brenton H. Dickson, III
1903-1988

The people of the Town of Weston and the members of the Weston Historical Society are truly fortunate to have had Brenton Dickson with them all his life. At the founding of the Historical Society in 1963 on the occasion of the 250th Anniversary of the Town's incorporation, Brent became a charter member of the Society, a member of the Board, and Historian. He continued actively as a Board member until his death.

Besides his numerous contributions to the BULLETIN, he was the author of three Weston oriented books: *Once Upon a Pung* (1963); with Homer Lucas, *One Town in the American Revolution — Weston, Massachusetts* (1976); and

Random Recollections (1977). His avid interest in things historical, particularly in connection with Weston, led to the authorship of these volumes.

He served from its establishment the Historical Commission of the Town, and he was a trustee of the Golden Ball Tavern. His wider interest in history is evidenced by his membership in the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The Town of Weston is further deeply indebted to Brent for his authorship of music and lyrics for many lighthearted original musicals concerned with Weston which have been produced by the Friendly Society.

Through all of his works and activities, Brent contributed mightily to the spirit of Weston and we salute him.

Edward W. Marshall

"OF PUNGS AND PEOPLE"

from Brenton H. Dickson, III, *Once Upon a Pung* (1963).

Editor's note: A pung is a boxlike sleigh drawn by one or two horses. This type of sleigh was frequently used to carry cargo.

It is interesting to note the changes that have taken place in Weston over the last sixty years. In 1900 it was a rural community with only twenty-five automobiles against five hundred horses. By 1920, however, the automobile had come into its own and there were only two hundred horses left.

Many residents remember when Central Avenue [now Boston Post Road] was unpaved. Automobiles were a rarity in summer and never seen in winter. Nearly every year the roads were packed hard with snow from the last week in December until the middle of March, but the sidewalks were kept plowed for pedestrians. As soon as the snow became too deep for carriages and wagons, sleighs and pungs made their appearance. The wheels were taken off some of the school barges and replaced with runners. Other barges which were not so easily converted were put away until spring, and open pungs were substituted. A thick layer of hay or straw on the floor to keep your feet warm and a buffalo robe for your lap were hardly adequate protection against the coldest weather. However, when the sound of sleigh bells heralded another winter, the young people looked forward to the pleasures of snowtime. . .

Punging parties were great events. Sometimes they lasted all day and well into evening. You went to Concord or Sudbury by devious routes, stopped for hot chocolate to fortify yourself for the return trip, and then took off once more. Riding the runners or sprinting along behind and throwing snowballs kept you well exercised, but as daylight began to fade it was customary to huddle together in the back of the pung under horse blankets and buffalo robes. The layer of straw that you sat on offered insulation but not much comfort. Yet the songs and laughter that filled the evening air were hardly indicative of discontent.

Another winter diversion was coasting on sleds or double runners on the packed roads. The grade down South Avenue from Morse's hill to Ridgeway Road was one of the longest coasts in town. It was not so exciting, however, as some of the

steeper places, such as Silver Hill or, even better, Webster Hill. The latter provided the coaster with a chance to exert real dexterity as he shot out onto Church Street at an amazing speed and barely avoided colliding with the stone wall on the far side. Starting at the Blakes' house (now Thrall's) you could race down across Central Avenue, through a yard or two, to Crescent Street, and on down past the chair factory. No one ever thought of posting a guard at street crossings. Traffic was light and the laws of probability favored the coaster. There were one or two narrow escapes, to be sure, but never anything serious.

Much has been said about how New England winters are becoming milder. It is hard to say definitely whether or not this is true, because the idiosyncrasies of nature are unpredictable and we are somewhat inclined to overlook the ordinary and remember the unusual. Some can remember sleighing on the first of May, others going to Boston on the Norumbega trolley in a driving snowstorm and looking out the window at the April 19th Marathon Race. Someone once remarked that New England only had two seasons, winter and the Fourth of July, and there are still years when this seems to be almost true again.

The best skating in the old days came before Christmas. Many an oldtimer recalls the thrill of skating to Waltham and back on the scenic Charles. Also a trip on the Sudbury River was a real adventure but it wasn't every year that you could do it. When conditions were right you took a Fitchburg train to Baker's Bridge, in Lincoln, walked to the river, skated to Wayland and took a train home on the Central Massachusetts. There were several good ponds in Weston, notably Brown's on North Avenue and Foote's on Warren Avenue, but once the snow had come, Mr. Winsor's pond was the only place that was consistently cleared. Everyone in town was welcome to use it. It had a section fenced off for curling, another for hockey, and a third for general skating. On one side there was a lean-to with benches and a stone fireplace where Mrs. Winsor kept a large urn of soup steaming hot for anyone who wanted it. Where but in Weston could one find such an example of community generosity?

Unfortunately the Winsors' reputation for hospitality spread across the town's borders, and an influx of strangers created a number of disagreeable situations that finally necessitated closing the pond to the public.

In summer there was a meager amount of swimming for a town with so many ponds. Legitimate swimming was available at the pool on School Street, where the boys were allowed to go at one time and the girls at another, never together. Almost everywhere else in the center was taboo because the brooks flowed into the Cambridge Reservoir. The City of Cambridge had obtained these water rights through the manipulations of a certain gentleman—often referred to as "Bloody Alonzo"—for his part in depriving the town of what should have been a community asset.

Of course you could swim in the reservoir, or anywhere else for that matter, providing you weren't caught. Silas Baxter was the patrolman for the watershed and his son, being one of the gang, would always tip his friends off as to his father's whereabouts.

To give an idea of the sparseness of population in those days, take, for example, the time Weston Blake and Felix Winsor went swimming illegally in the pond by the eighth hole of the Golf Club. Mr. Winsor's foreman, to teach them a lesson, took their clothes. They made their way back to the Blakes' house in broad daylight stark naked without ever seeing anyone or being seen!

Fishing in the reservoirs was also taboo although the authorities were more lenient in the upper parts of the tributaries. The editor remembers once when his father, the Town Clerk, and P. J. McAuliffe, Chief of Police, smuggled fishing poles down to the Stony Brook Reservoir, all of which goes to show that "Bloody Alonzo's" dealings were resented by the old as well as the young.

Between seasons there were informal football games at the Winsors' farm where the Golf Club's second fairway is today. It was a sheep pasture then and after a game the players would go into the barn for warm milk, fresh from the cows. Then there were baseball games among semi-organized teams from the Center, Silver Hill and Warren Avenue. For those who wanted to earn money and learn something of farming, there was Hillcrest Farm, owned by Miss Marion Case. There were other odd jobs around town for boys but almost none for girls. For an occasional fifteen cents you could caddy at the Weston Golf Club in Kendal Green.

This nine-hole course, one of the oldest in the country and one of the sportiest, was mostly on Coburn property. Cows were pastured on the fairways and part of the caddy's job was to drive them to one side so a player could make his shot. . .

And such was Weston when the population was 1800; when there were only ten pupils in a class at high school; when a shortage of boys made football teams impossible; when large ice cream cones could be bought at the soda fountain for one cent; when Mr. Eaton, superintendent of schools and headmaster, taught Political Economy and Virgil (fifty lines of translation required per day) and coached the school baseball team. Almost every house had a pantry leading off the kitchen with a flour barrel, a sugar barrel, a jug of molasses, and a tub of lard. The kitchen was heated by a black coal stove on which a kettle was always boiling, and the smell of bread baking in the oven, or of pies, was enough to whet anybody's appetite.

In the winter the girls wore long black stockings and high button shoes and the boys, corduroy suits, and leather boots with a steel plate set in each heel for attaching skates. . .

No description of the early twentieth century would be complete without mentioning Miss Mary Field's dancing class held at the old Town Hall once a week during the school year. It was conducted in two sections, one for the younger children and one for the older boys and girls. Miss Field always had a pair of black castanets in her hand and she clicked them to start and stop the music or to call her pupils to attention. The girls all wore their party dresses and the boys blue serge suits, black pumps and white gloves.

"Come and get washed for dancing school," a mother would call to her son.

"Why do I have to wash my hands when I'm going to wear gloves?" was a question often asked.

Miss Field taught her pupils the galop, the waltz and the polka, first illustrating the steps herself and then expecting the same from her pupils. Anyone who attended those classes will never forget her rhythmic words, "Slide, slide, and a step, step, step" — or the clicking of the castanets when the dancers got out of time with the music.

The feature dance which came towards the end of the session was the "German" in which a boy would find his surprise partner through various antics. In one, each girl put a shoe on a pile in the middle of the floor. When Miss Field clicked her castanets, the boys would rush out and pick up one of the shoes and dance with the girl to whom it belonged. Another method of partner-choosing was for the boy to sit regally in a chair and hold a mirror. The girls would come up behind him, one at a time. If he didn't want to dance with what he saw he ran his hand across the glass as if to brush her off and the next girl would step up and try her luck. When he found the one he wanted he tossed the mirror aside, bowed formally to her — she would reciprocate with a curtsey and the couple would dance off. A third method involved a large sheet, held in front of the girls. Miss Field grasped one end and her assistant, Susan Johnson, the other while the girls would expose a thumb above the barrier. The boys would choose the best-looking thumb and dance with the owner.

After the "German" came the Grand March, which was the favorite dance with most of the boys, as it meant the end of the session.

Grand marches in the old Town Hall were not particularly safe, especially with large groups of grownups, for the floor would tremble beneath their footfalls and begin to heave up and down. On one such occasion Mr. Horace Sears, suddenly realizing that the foot rhythm was getting dangerously close to the harmonics of the building, rushed up and stopped the music in time to keep the marchers from ending up in the cellar. . .

Driving through Weston Center or Kendal Green you saw mostly familiar faces. Everyone knew everyone else in those days. When newcomers came to town it wouldn't be long before you knew them too and accepted them as part of the community. Every citizen was deeply interested in the problems of his neighbor — and if the problems were acute, a lending hand was always forthcoming. For this reason there were no destitute families. Fortunately we had in Mrs. Percy Warren an efficient welfare department, organized by, and comprising, herself alone. As there were no other members there were never any difficulties in making a quick decision, or any arguments to interfere with the efficiency of the organization. Whenever a family was in dire need of financial aid she was quick to find out about it. Then, sitting down at her telephone, she would call a few people, who insisted on anonymity and upon whom she could always depend. All necessary funds were raised in a matter of minutes.

When it came to charity, religious affiliations were unimportant. A good example of this is a conversation overheard one day in the Post Office between Mr. George D. Pushee, a staunch Unitarian, and the Baptist minister.

"Have you been able to pay off your mortgage?" Mr. Pushee asked.

"Not yet," replied the minister.

"Tomorrow you send me a note telling the exact amount, and I'll take care of it," said Mr. Pushee. . .

"EARLY AUTOMOBILES"

from Brenton H. Dickson, III, *Random Recollections* (1977.)

The first automobile I can remember was our one cylinder Cadillac which my father bought in 1903 or 1904. It was his third automotive venture; earlier he had owned a steam Locomobile and a gasoline Northern. The Cadillac seldom strayed beyond town limits, and we kept it in a wing of the barn [125 Highland Street] known as the "Bubble House." It was green, with doors for the back seat but none for the front and had neither top nor windshield, so when it rained you either had to wear a rubber coat or raise an umbrella to keep dry. There were no headlights—just a pair of kerosene lamps mounted on either side of the dashboard, and a kerosene tail light.

The engine was under the front seat. To start it you inserted a crank through a hole in the side of the vehicle and turned the large flywheel, which spun around steadily once the motor caught. One day my father got Pat McAuliffe, the police chief, to clock him on a level stretch of road, and calculations proved that he attained the amazing speed of twenty miles an hour! About 1909 or 1910 the Cadillac became incapacitated; a large bolt let go in the motor, causing irreparable damage. My father was heartbroken because he considered it the best automobile he had ever owned, and we kept it in a shed for several years before finally selling it to a junk man who came and towed it away. Going down Ball's Hill into Waltham the steering mechanism broke and the driver lost control and ran into a tree. Luckily he only fractured an arm.

In 1906 my grandfather bought a four cylinder Mitchell which we still have. In its day it was a fine touring car with large brass headlights that burned acetylene. The gas was generated in a brass tank on the running board. There were two compartments in the tank, one for water and one for calcium carbide. By turning a knob the water would drip onto the carbide and generate acetylene, and when the gas flowed freely through the system you lit the lamps with a match. There was always a pop from an accumulation of gas in the lamp chamber, and a continuous sizzle when once lit. This was all a rather clumsy arrangement, but as we rarely drove at night we were not much inconvenienced by it. A few years later the *Prestolite* tank was developed: a cylinder containing gas under pressure and a much handier arrangement.

Since the Mitchell had no top, my grandfather had one made at a carriage shop, which could be raised during a shower to keep dry or on a summer day for shade. The top had a celluloid windshield that rolled down and fastened to the dashboard—a wonderful protection when driving in the rain. This was one of the earlier windshields; they were not in general use on automobiles until a year or so later.

Eddie Green drove the Mitchell for my grandfather, and one day on a straight stretch of road my grandfather said, "Turn her loose and see what she'll do." They estimated their speed at forty miles an hour and came home feeling quite proud of the achievement. My grandmother never shared my grandfather's yen for speed; fifteen miles an hour was fast enough for her, and we would proceed along the highway as slowly as a funeral procession, but nobody cared because in those days you had the road practically to yourself.

The Mitchell was kept in our "Bubble House", as my grandfather had no use for it in Boston where he lived. When in Weston he liked to be driven around the country but he never went very far; the roads were poor, there were no filling stations, and the possibility of a flat tire or a breakdown too far from home was an important consideration.

About 1908 my father bought an air-cooled Corbin. It frequently overheated and caught fire, and we always had a pail of sand along as an extinguisher. In 1910 he turned this in for a water-cooled Corbin which was delivered to us late one summer afternoon by two men who had driven it up from the factory in New Britain, Connecticut. The shadows were beginning to lengthen as they started for home in our old air-cooled car, and we were thankful not to be going with them. . .

Our new Corbin was low slung and sporty looking, but its principal appeal to me was the noise it made—you could hear it coming from a long way off. Once Eddie Green was reprimanded by the Weston police for driving it through town with his muffler cut-out open. He denied the accusation and told the officer he would show him what it sounded like if he used the cut-out. On hearing the deafening roar the officer jumped back, and when he had composed himself he said, "I see what you mean."

My father never cared much for the Corbin. It was very hard to start and he claimed his back had been permanently injured from cranking the heavy motor. After he had driven it over a stonewall on Highland Street and cracked one of the main engine supports, he gave it to the town to be converted into a fire engine—the town's first motorized hook-and-ladder wagon.

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These brief selections illustrate the wit and wisdom of Brent Dickson. Copies of all his published writings are available:

Once Upon a Pung, $7.50 Richardson Drug Store and the Weston Pharmacy.
Random Recollections Weston Historical Society Mrs. Alice T. Fraser, 894-2872.
One Town in the American Revolution—Weston, Massachusetts, $10.00 hardbound, $5.95 paper Mrs. Marion Kellogg, 181 Boston Post Road, 893-0824.

The Editor

Edwin Buckingham Sears

I had the pleasure of first meeting Edwin Buckingham Sears during the summer of 1983, while touring various historical properties under the care of The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. He was a man thoroughly baptized in the architectural and decorative traditions of his forebears, for which he dedicated his lifetime as collector and conservator.

Mr. Sears was born in Weston in 1911. His uncle Horace Scudder Sears (refer to W.H.S. bulletin Vol. XX No. 3, March 1984) was a benefactor of the town. Edwin spent much of his childhood enjoying Weston and its environs, where many of his kin resided. In later life, he did not live in Weston; however, the happy memory of his childhood in the town, doubtless, remained with him till his death in May 1987.

Nonetheless, I was surprised greatly to discover the extent of Edwin's affection for our Society. His legacy of ten thousand dollars will go far to propagate the memory of Weston's settlers and citizens throughout its continuing history.

Frederic A. Crafts III

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Editor's Note: The numbering of the Bulletins will be changed to more accurately reflect the dates of actual issue. No "1986" Bulletins will be issued. The "October 1985" Bulletin, issued in July 1987, Volume XXII, No. 1, will be the only issue for 1987. Volume XXIII, No. 1 and No. 2, will be the two issues for 1988. Volume XXIV, No. 1, will be issued in the early spring of 1989.

Additional copies of THE BULLETIN may be obtained by phoning Mrs. Raymond Paynter, Jr., 899-3533, or by calling at the Josiah Smith Tavern any Wednesday afternoon during "Open House". If you have a spare copy of BULLETINS, vintage 1963-70, our Curator, Mrs. J. E. Fraser 894-2872, would be pleased to receive them.