

HISTORIC ROOTS

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“WE LIVED IN A WILDERNESS WORLD”

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

There was frost every month the first summer the Pottle family lived in Stowe. The year was 1816. Crops were poor. No corn was raised. Money was very scarce. Daniel Pottle later remembered that the children in the family had cried for bread, but they had to make do with potatoes and salt. He remembered too that the walls of their house had cracks so wide the snow blew through them onto their bed covers.

Stories about everyday life when Vermont was a new state are hard to find. Daniel Pottle's memories can be found in a book belonging to the Stowe Historical Society. So can the memories of 46 other early Stowe residents.

These memories were collected by Pottle and a group of other senior citizens. They called themselves the “Three Score and Ten Union Society” because everyone in the club was over seventy.¹ These elderly men and women had all seen hard times. Yet all had lived to a good old age. They wanted to help those

¹ “Score” is an old-fashioned way of saying twenty. So “three score and ten” is another way of saying seventy.

who came after them. So they left written accounts of their own lives. Two years ago the Society decided to publish this book of autobiographies.² Now many people can read about what life was like in Vermont's early days.

Families were big back then. Lydia Wilkins had 14 children. She wrote: "If my first husband had not been a good man & kind to me, I could never had endured what I have suffered—Sometimes had 17 in my family." As a young girl Lydia had earned money by "working out" in other people's houses. She spun and wove cloth and did housework. She earned 62 or 68 cents a week. Lydia remembered spending her money on calico cloth³ for a dress.

Boys who worked out were not paid in cash until they were twenty-one years old. Instead they were given a calf or other livestock. Grown men often had to go out of state to find work. Elisha Town could not make enough money as a farmer in Stowe, so he went to New York State. There he got a job chopping wood. Towne worked in New York for some time. Then he brought his earnings back to his family in Vermont.

There were no churches in Stowe in the early days. But this book tells us that religion was important to many of the townspeople.

² An autobiography is a story a person writes about him or herself.

³ Calico cloth is a coarse cloth usually printed with a colorful design.

From the 1937 publication, *More Than One Hundred Years in the Sheldon Poor House History, 1853-1857*, compiled by Edward P. Kearney.



This picture of the Sheldon poor farm, called the Sheldon Poor House, was taken in 1937. The barns and other farm buildings are not shown.

Back then people gathered for church services in log houses and one-room schools. Often there was no minister, so they had to run the services themselves.

There was no Social Security back then either. Some people could not save enough money for their old age and had to spend their last years at the Stowe poor farm. This farm had been bought by the town in 1859 as a place to live for those who were too old, too poor, or too ill to support or care for themselves. Those who were healthy and fit were expected to work for their keep. The others helped out where they could. Money to run the farm came from the sale of the milk, cream, and hay the residents produced.

There were poor farms all over Vermont. Most Vermonters agreed that "going to the

poorhouse” was a disgrace, the worst thing that could happen to them. As late as 1948 there was still a poor farm in Stowe.

Here are two autobiographies from this book. The punctuation and spelling have been corrected.



Laura Lyman was born in Barnstable, Canada on July 12, 1803.

“I came to Stowe in 1835 and I have lived alone 25 years up to last May 1874, and have not been sick so as to require help to take care of me during that time, not so much as to make my bed for me. I have as much grunting as the next one, but do it alone. I can say I was born in the woods. My parents lived in the wood about one mile from the nearest neighbor when I was born, and I lived there until I was five years old. When I was about one year old Mother was going home from one of the neighbors with me in her arms and a woman with us. We met a great bear in the road. The woman screamed and told Mother to run for her life or the bear would eat up the child. But she stood and looked at the bear until the bear turned and walked off. Mother was much frightened. But she said that if she had turned and run the bear would have followed her. There were screech owls in the wood and they make a horrible noise. One time when Mother

was gone, one came and lit on the house and made a frightful screeching, and it scared us children very much. So that I can say ‘I was born in the woods and have been scared by owls.’”



Edward Moody was born in Stowe on June 14, 1800.

“My father, Clement Moody, came from Kennebec, Maine about 1793, went on to the land where Azro Slayton now lives. It was then all woods except a small chopping (clearing) where there was a log house covered with bark, a basswood log floor. Lived pretty short. Then had to go to Williston to a grist mill. First school I went to was kept by a black man. He was a fiddler named Festus. I used to be pretty

John P. Dumville, Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, Montpelier, Vt.



The Hyde Log Cabin in Grand Isle, built in 1783, may be the oldest log cabin in Vermont that is still standing.

short for clothes. Went barefoot summer and winter. Used to warm a chip or piece of board, carry it out and stand on it to chop wood. Some times Mother sewed rags on to my feet. Never had but one pair of shoes till I was old enough to work out and buy them.

“Father died when I was thirteen years old. Mother was poor. Had six children, no cow. She worked out by day’s work, washing or taking in spinning to support herself & children. Mother’s name before she was married was Scribner. She came from Kennebec. I lived with Mother until she was married to Mr. Stephen Jones of Waterbury. I worked out. I remember I worked [for] Joel Harris for a peck a corn a day.

From *Three Score and Ten*.

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This is a sample of Edward Moody's handwriting.

“I was married to Christine Kenney Oct. 23, 1824. Have had four children, two boys & two girls. I have lived around in many places. Never home I call my own until I bought the one where we now live, and this we are obliged to give up to the town. For a few years past my health has been so poor that I could not

labor and was obliged to call on the town for assistance.”

A note in the book tells us that Edward Moody and his wife, Christine, both died at the poor farm. It also tells us that Edward Moody’s father was the second settler at Stowe, “missing by one day being the first.”

The book from which these autobiographies are taken is called *Three Score and Ten Union Society: Being Autobiographical Accounts of the Experiences By Some Early Residents of Stowe, Vermont*. It was published by the Stowe Historical Society in 1993. Excerpts courtesy of Stowe Historical Society.

Rooting Around

Elderly people love to tell stories about their past. Why not ask an older neighbor or member of your family to tell you stories of the ‘old days.’ Maybe they have old pictures you could look at too.