

When the world came to your front door

Just because I'm the most ancient columnist appearing in the Mansfield News and scribble about history, don't think I eat my heart out for the "good old days." Today is A-okay with me.

But I have to admit, when now and then I take a long look back, that there were ways in which everyday home life in the 1920s and '30s was better.

That was when the butcher, the baker and everybody but the candlestick maker brought his wares to your front door.

Let's start with the butcher. Louie (I never knew his last name) would park his meat truck in front of our house and in a tenor voice of Metropolitan Opera quality sing "O Sole Mio" as he sliced the steak with a knife sharp enough for shaving.

It was like having Enrico Caruso bring your lamb chops or liver. Louie was wonderfully warm-hearted. My mother told me later that when I was a baby he'd let her weigh me on his meat scale.

Joe Mondor from Norton and after him the genial Carroll Findley, who lived on Pratt Street, also called, their trucks almost sagging under the load of fresh fruits and vegetables. Then came West Mansfield's Mr. Bator, the egg man - my little sister called him "Aig Bator."

Daily at 3 a.m. Oscar Mason drove from his lower South Main Street home to Boston fish pier and returned with all kinds of seafood to sell door to door. Once a week through the summer Mrs. Alice Archibald visited with juicy farm-grown berries of every variety.



Mansfield Dairy

The baker on wheels (his name escapes me) brought cakes and fresh bread at 11 cents a loaf. Every morning Emil Schulz left us two reusable glass bottles of real cow's milk with thick cream on top.

And speaking of ancient let me not forget the elderly fellow - he must have been in his 70s -- who announced his home-baked product and himself with a sprightly, "I'm the cookie boy!"

Not to be outdone, the markets - the closest one to us was Charlie Pratt's on South Main across from Horace Street, later Carroll Findley's, then Arthur Filion's - delivered telephoned orders. An hour after you called, a friendly man would drive up and lug the bags of groceries into your kitchen.

Edibles weren't the only deliveries. Frank McRae's Mansfield Coal & Grain trucks brought ice for our ice box in summer and coal for the furnace and the kitchen stove in winter. When the ice truck came, we kids hung around the leather-aproned driver while he chipped at the frozen block to bring it down to weight. Then we'd grab the biggest ice splinters and suck them like Popsicles.

My Uncle Charlie worked on the coal truck. From our bay window I'd watch him dump the grimy sacks of anthracite down an iron chute through a cellar window and into our coal bin.

Even doctors made cheerful house calls, at your convenience rather than theirs. Dr. John W. Cook of North Main Street, physician to five generations of our family, always had his black leather bag filled with little bottles of every pill ever invented. This saved my mother from having to take the trolley car to the drug store.

Mail delivery was better, too - twice daily, at noon and 4 p.m., carried by Ralph Morono, who pedaled his bicycle barely fast enough to keep from tipping over. And no junk mail!

Other than to buy clothes and shoes or visit the library or the dentist or get her hair waved, the housewife of seven or eight decades ago didn't have to venture outside her door unless she chose.

I don't mean to sound sexist, but the fact is, this whole economy depended on wives not working outside the home. It collapsed during and after World War II when married women got paying jobs and were gone all day. Probably we'll never see the like again. But while it lasted, front door delivery of the daily necessities did make life easier many years ago.

Jesse Smith's alcoholic racehorse

Occasionally the Mansfield News front pages features a report of a drunk driver who broadsides another vehicle at an intersection, sometimes with tragic results.

Such stories make oldheads like me, who recall when horse-drawn buggies and wagons clip-clopped along our main street, think of those safe and sane days when cars were few.

That is, until I saw historian Jennie Copeland's account of Jesse Smith and his alcoholic horse. "Whoa!" I said and pulled up short.

We don't know if Jesse partook of the booze. Other than that he was a grocer's son, born in Taunton in 1844 and buried in our Spring Brook Cemetery in 1892, we know little about him.

He lived at 133 South Main Street from 1868 until 1879, when the bank, stuck with two defaulted mortgages, auctioned off his property.

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His horse, named (appropriately) Hardroad, he boarded in L.R. King and Son's livery stable behind the Park Hotel on Park Row, the site of our present town offices on the south side of the Common.

We do know, and for good reason, that Jesse Smith and Hardroad participated in the popular horse-drawn sleigh races that took place annually on our snowy North and South Main streets.

Jesse's Hardroad was a hard drinker. He did his best only if given a pint of whiskey – whether Overholt Straight Rye, Blue Blazes, Jim Beam or some other brand of white lightning we can't guess – just before a race.

In Victorian days Mansfield got plenty of snow. But we owned no plows, and the town's horse-drawn wooden roller would get clogged if the snow was wet. So a heavy plank was dragged behind a horse to create a firm, smooth surface.



Horse-drawn wooden roller

For an interesting picture of horses pulling sleighs on snowbound North Main Street, see page 21 in McNatt's and Todesco's photo history of this old town.

The races began just south of where Taunton Branch Railroad crossed North Main Street. The railroad is long gone, but the former crossing is marked by a post clock at the intersection of Old Colony Way.

From there, the improvised racecourse followed North Main past Lovell's (now West Street) Corner and ended on South Main Street just below Wilson Place, in front of Charlie Pratt's store. Length of the course was about a half mile.

Racing fans crowded the sidewalks along the way, especially at Lovell's Corner, because whichever horse and sleigh led at that 4/10-of-a-mile point was likely to be the winner.

Normally someone – maybe stalwart Mansfield constable Tom Nelson – stood guard at the Corner to prevent accidents. Just once that important duty was neglected.

In this particular race, as Jesse and the liquored-up Hardroad approached Lovell's at breakneck speed, two girls, Abbie Smith (presumably no relation to Jesse) and her younger sister, drove their sleigh into the intersection from West Street.

It's lucky anyone survived when Hardroad T-boned the girls' sleigh. What saved them no one knows. Their horse was so badly hurt it was laid up the rest of that winter. Jesse owed his life to a heavy fur cap that protected his skull.

As so commonly happens in present day highway crashes, the cause of it all survived. Hardroad, a hit-and-run horse, kept going.

Apparently figuring, in his alcoholic haze, that his daily stint was done and he needn't continue to Pratt's store, he took a hard right into Park Row and headed for the barn.

There he was found leaning against the stable, thinking unutterable thoughts.

Did Hardroad and Jessie resume racing? My guess is they did. Sleigh races lasted until six years after Jesse's death, when Mansfield & Norton Street Railway began running cars up and down our main drag.

The Ghost of Nicholas White

Historian Jennie Copeland described Nicholas White III, who came here from Taunton in 1703 and built one of the two oldest houses still standing in Mansfield, Massachusetts, as a “local statesman.”

But to a lively-tempered woman who in the 20th century lived around the corner from his former home, Nicholas was a ghost, and an annoying ghost at that.

The story is, she became so spooked by his ectoplasmic visitations that she toted a sledge hammer to his nearby grave site and smashed his headstone to smithereens.

This tale is untrue, because David Grant of Mansfield recently sent me a photo of the unscarred stone. It bears the inscription “Nicholas White 1675-1743” and is situated near the sharp bend of Hall Street, not far from Nicholas’s colonial dwelling.

No one knows if White sleeps beneath the rounded boulder. It was placed about 1850, at least a century after his death, and may be only a memorial.

Nicholas and his bride, Experience King, had barely begun housekeeping when they faced a problem. At that time a corner of Old Taunton protruded into the present Mansfield, putting their house in Taunton, as was their church, 10 miles away.

Church attendance was mandatory, and Sundays meant a tiresome horseback ride for the newlyweds. In 1707 and 1708, Nicholas petitioned Taunton and the General Court in Boston to set off the north part of Taunton as a separate precinct with its own church.



Nicholas White House, Hall Street

At first the parent town stonewalled, but in 1709 they caved and authorized formation of Taunton North Precinct, now Norton and Mansfield. Two years later another step was taken as the North Precinct became the town of Norton.

Nicholas White was the town’s first treasurer, a selectman for 11 years and a representative from Norton to the General Court. He also served as a lieutenant in the local militia company.

He was one of 13 original members of the First Church of Christ on Norton common. The same day that Norton’s first minister, the Rev. Joseph Avery, was ordained, Nicholas became the church’s first deacon, in which post he served many years.

But he and others in the northern part of Norton still weren’t happy. He lived four miles from the Rev. Avery’s church, and wanted once again to split and form another new precinct with a new church and minister.

Twice, in 1721 and 1722, White rode to Boston, with his name at the head of a petition requesting the General Court to grant dismissal from Norton. Twice he was turned down.

But he persisted, and on a third visit in 1731 the Court bowed to his request and legalized the creation of Norton North Precinct – the future Mansfield.

At the first five North Precinct meetings Nicholas was twice chosen moderator and served on a committee to raise funds to hire and then pay a preacher. He also became a deacon of the new church, which stood on the present Mansfield South Common.

He and Experience raised nine children in the 1703 house. Legend has it that the young-uns entered the world in the “borning room,” now the kitchen. But borning room is a modern term and the truth is, nobody knows which room the kids were born in.

On Sept. 2, 1743, Nicholas White, after spending 40 years in the same house, died, laden with honors. For a farmer he was well off and left a large estate on both sides of Hall Street. He was buried on his own land. Experience survived him by nearly nine years.

One of this old town’s favorite ladies, the late Lois Thomas, lived from 1955 until recently¹ in the house that Nicholas White III built. She too reported his ghostly visits. But no sledge hammer was needed: she and his spirit hit it off quite amicably.

¹ Mrs. Thomas past away on June 23, 2013 at the age of 99.