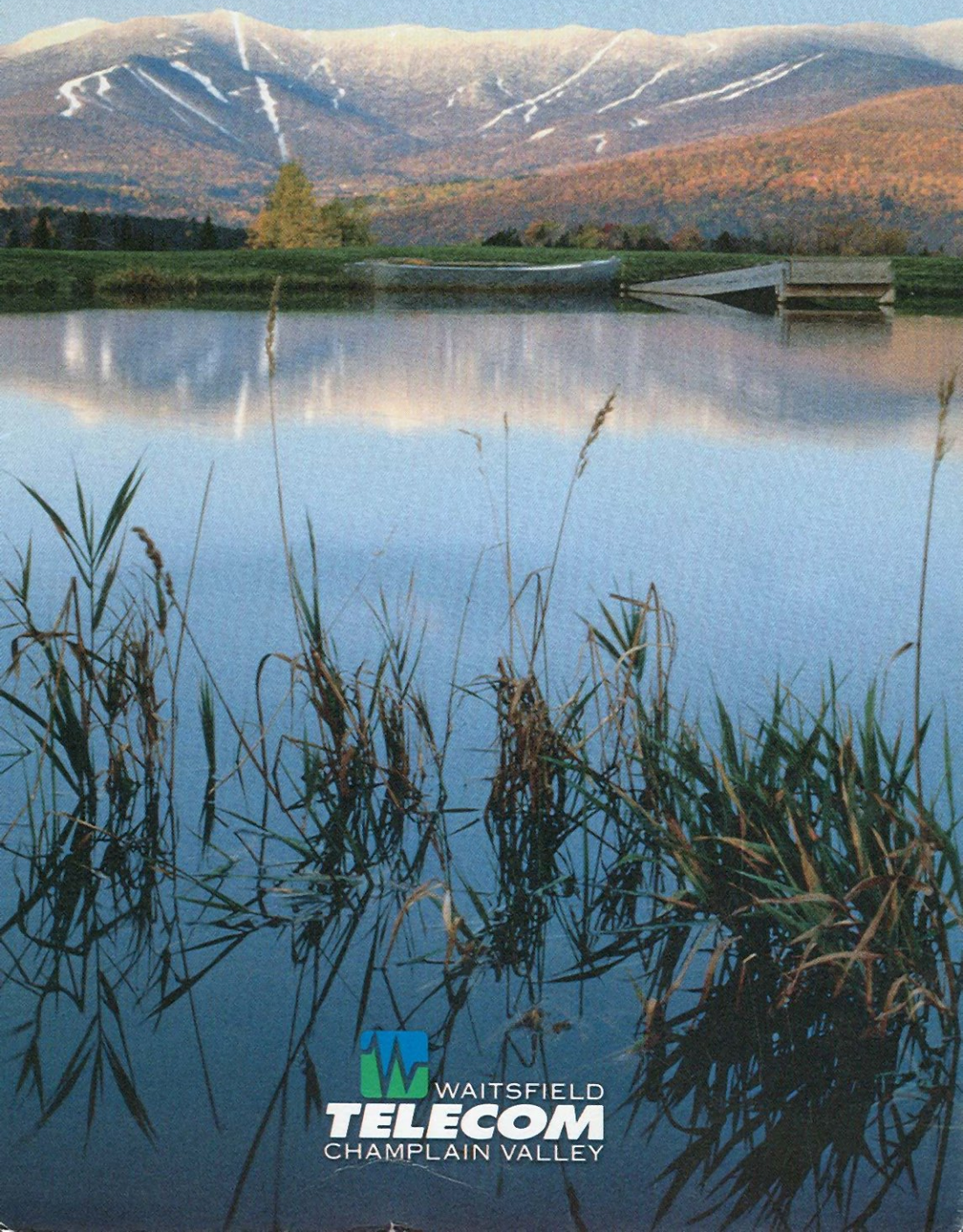


Waitsfield Telecom

JUNE 2005 – 2006



 WAITSFIELD
TELECOM
CHAMPLAIN VALLEY

2005 WAITSFIELD HISTORY

Written and Researched by Rick Haynes

"The first road — if it may be termed a road — which traversed our valley was doubtless an Indian trail following the river, but that certainly was not available to accommodate the settlers, for at the second meeting of the Proprietors in November of 1788, William Strong was paid to build a road."

Matt Bushnell Jones

The History of Waitsfield, Vermont

A Story about Roads

Ken Quackenbush of Waitsfield tells a humorous story, one that is a fitting comment on the general state of Vermont roads until the second half of the last century.

Ken was in New York State when a traveler asked him how to get to Port Kent, NY. It is the western terminal of the ferry that crosses Lake Champlain to Burlington. Given the time of day, Ken was confident that the tourist could not make the last ferry, but the tourist insisted on trying to make the last boat. Ken wondered out loud why it was so important to take the ferry and not to drive across the Crown Point Bridge. The female traveler responded ever so bluntly, "I want to avoid driving on those Vermont roads as much as possible!"

Of course, anyone who has driven some of our back roads in April may smile and nod when they hear a comment like that of the doubting tourist. But it is hard to

argue that our modern “mud season” is more than an inconvenience that requires extra visits to the car wash and removing our shoes at the back door. After all, if you trust the wisdom of the voters, most Vermont residents favor retaining unpaved roads and frown on major asphalt projects. And, in truth, most Vermont drivers negotiate the muck for only a few weeks a year and very few of us need to be towed.

Back in the days...

If we feel the need to complain about our daily commute, lets try to imagine conditions of a few years ago — or to be more accurate a couple of hundred years ago — to the period when Vermont and the Mad River Valley was being settled. Before we explore some of the transportation issues that faced early residents of the Mad River Valley, it would be fitting to begin with a little background.

It all begins with Samuel de Champlain

In 1609, the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, traveling the length of Lake Champlain, laid claim to the eastern shore in the name of France. He called the land “Verd Mont,” French for Green Mountains.

In 1763, the French territory was granted to Britain as part of the Treaty of Paris, calling an end to the French and Indian War. However a hitch developed soon afterwards — both New York and New Hampshire laid claim to the same land — the land that was to become Vermont.

Ethan Allen, an entrepreneur and land speculator from Connecticut, bought tracts of forest land throughout Vermont. He was granted his land titles by New Hampshire, as part of the “New Hampshire Grants.” The fact that New York also claimed rights to these lands raised the ire of Allen and a fellowship of fellow speculators. It was not only the claims laid by New York that angered them, they were equally disdainful of Great Britain and the grasp



Samuel de Champlain

the country held on the colonies. In 1770, the men armed themselves as a militia — they took this matter very seriously — and acquired the name “Green Mountain Boys.”

This rag-tag, but spirited, militia took to the woods in an attempt to change the scene. They began to hand Britain a series of defeats, beginning with the Battle of Ticonderoga, moving up the lake to Crown Point and then on to St. Johns, Quebec. By 1777, the matter was settled. Their efforts led to the defeat of the British. As a result, New York faded from the picture. Vermont went on to become a republic, separate from, and independent of, the 14 original states. Vermont soon established its own constitution, coined its own currency, and gave the legislature the power to form local governments.

It is in this historical context that new faces and new families made their way into Vermont and the Mad River Valley.

Valley Grants and Settlements, 1763-1788

In the briefest way possible, we'll take a look at the four Valley towns in their very early days.

Moretown was the first Valley town to be granted a charter. On June 7, 1763, King George III — through the hands of New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth — “by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland, King and defender of the Faith,” granted the charter for lands that would become Moretown, about 23,000 altogether. The grant established the Winooski River as its northern line with the other borders drawn as straight lines, a fact that did not take geography into account. The resulting territory was one divided by mountains, ridges and rivers. The challenge was — and remains to this day — one of establishing a unified community. In fact, the first settlement took place along the Winooski River, far removed from the town's eventual village center and even farther so from the settlements east of the Northfield Range. It was not until 1790 that Ebenezer Hazeltine cleared land upriver from Duxbury. Settlement in the Mad River Valley area of Moretown follows later.

Other Towns Soon Follow

Shortly after the first land was tilled in Moretown, John Thorp and about seventy fellow investors received a grant of land that would become the town of Warren. In 1824, additional land was annexed from the town of Lincoln, bringing the total area of the town to just over 27,000 acres.

The town was named after Joseph Warren, a militia General who was the first American fatality during the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Among Warren's first settlers was Asahel Young, much admired for his bear hunting skills. Young built a cabin for himself down along the river. Taking advantage of the power that the river offered, Young opened a grist mill, thus laying the foundation of what would later become Warren Village. Meanwhile, a significant settlement was occurring on the plateau along the east end of town. Up there was an established travel route laid out by the Indians, and the level, fertile land was conducive to agriculture. "East Warren" became the town's center of commerce until the 1820s.

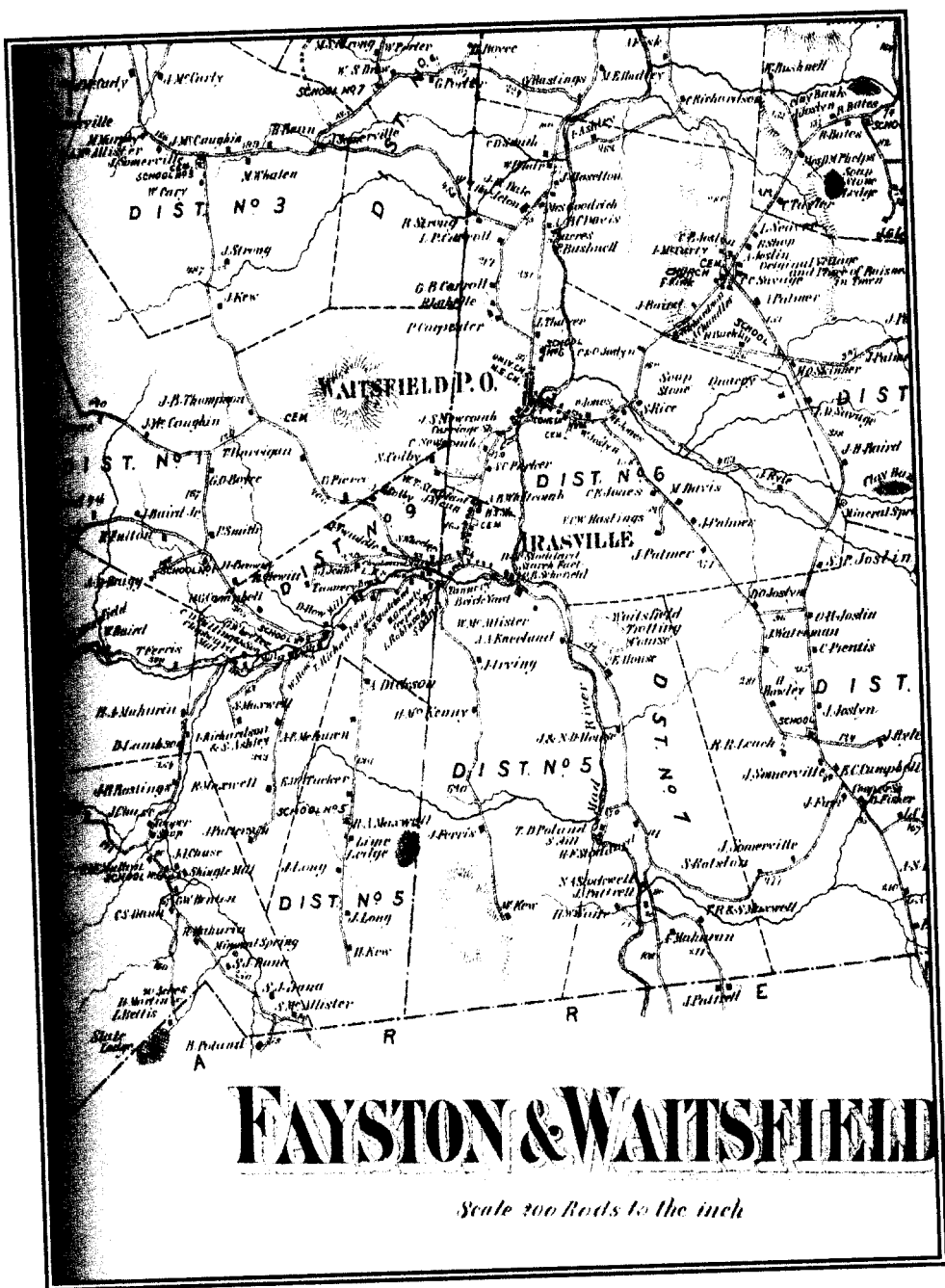
The Wait Family Arrives

The next town to grow was Waitsfield, when, on February 25, 1782, a charter was granted by the Governor of Vermont to Colonel Benjamin Wait and around seventy investors. The land was originally surveyed by William Strong and encompassed about 23,000 acres. The territory stretched from the western foothills of the Green Mountain Main Range eastward and over the summit of what we now call the Northfield Range. It later became obvious that the sensible thing to do was to cede the land to the east of the ridge to the town of Northfield, and parcels were annexed to that town in 1822 and 1896. The area of the town is currently about 15,000 acres.

Evidence of human activity in Waitsfield before the arrival of white settlers is sketchy. There is little archaeological evidence of Indian activity other than a single arrowhead found along the Mad River near the Moretown line.

White settlement began in 1789, when Benjamin Wait arrived with other family members from their home in Windsor, Vermont. The General's first home in the Valley was a simple wooden cabin, built on a knoll to the east of the current village.

According to an historical account given in the September 1st issue of the



Map reprinted from DeBeers Atlas for Washington County

Northfield News, the first Wait house was the “only building within ten miles of another.”

Around 1793, Wait built the town's first frame house on a lot just below the cabin. (The original frame house was moved around 1830 to its present location on Route 100. It currently is home to the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce.)

In 1798, settlers cleared a common area and a cemetery. They erected a meetinghouse, a place to meet and conduct town affairs. A store was soon opened and the population around “Waitsfield Common” burgeoned. Around the same time, another densely populated settlement was growing to the south, at the foot of Scrag Mountain.

A Mountain Community

Believed to have the highest average of elevation of any town in Vermont, Fayston is truly a mountain community. Though the only Valley town not to claim a bank of the Mad River, Fayston was well served by two main feeder streams: the Mill and Shepard Brooks, both providing power for the early saw mills.

The Fayston charter was granted to Ebenezer Walbridge in 1788 and the town was organized in 1805. In 1798, Lynde Wait settled on Bragg Hill. Further development from then on centered at the northern and southern extremities of town, along both the Mill and Shepard Brooks. William and Paul Boyce were the first settlers along Shepard's Brook; the area came to be called “North” Fayston.

The geology of the area made it practical for residents of the south end of town to conduct commerce in Waitsfield and those of North Fayston to head toward Moretown.

By the mid-1800s, the town was served by ten schools, each one serving local areas of settlement. This was a development pattern typical of other area towns. It is interesting to note that by the 1860s, largely as a result of the Irish potato blight, the Irish population in town grew tremendously. It is estimated that nearly one-third of Fayston residents were from Ireland. (A similar settlement took place in Moretown, particularly on “Paddy Hill,” about a mile east of the village.)

From Warren to Waitsfield, small pockets of settlement sprouted within township boundaries. Roads were cut to connect families with each other and for neighbors to share access to meetinghouses and schools. Town-wide “Planning” was unheard of; decisions were made among neighbors on such matters as roads and maintenance — costs were born by those making the decisions.

Little Need for a Transportation "Infrastructure"

Like most other settlers in Vermont, the ones who arrived in the Mad River Valley were looking for a life of independence and self-sufficiency. Once here, they found little reason to leave, so they were mostly concerned about how they could navigate to and through the local communities within a town's borders. Villages rose to serve the small, tight-knit communities within each town.

It would be an understatement to say that the job of getting around was difficult, but other than to move lumber from the woods to the sawmill, and likewise the grain to the gristmill, townspeople found it generally unnecessary to leave their homesteads. After all, they raised grain for feed and sustenance for farm animals, they grew vegetable gardens, they hunted and occasionally fished for food, they wove wool and made their own clothing.

In short, they brought with them the independence for which this state is known.

From Foot Trails to Surveyed Roads

When the Waits arrived in Waitsfield, roads became the issue of first order. After the settlers' lots were drawn and located, a committee of three (of which Benjamin Wait was one) set out to determine where the roads should be laid out. After walking the woods they issued their report: "We have looked the three ways we were directed, and found the way through Warren Hollow (East Warren) will accommodate the settlement of the town best. We also find that there may be a road to Northfield that will accommodate the east side of the town." They continue: "The road through Warren will strike through Waitsfield, thence, keeping in that line...to the Moretown line then turning down to the river." This route suggests the approximate course that now connects Moretown Village via the Pony Farm Road and the North and Common Roads with the eastern parts of Waitsfield and Warren.

So, it seems — with some notable exceptions — that newcomers to the area preferred the higher ground to the east of the Mad River. This was true, not only in Waitsfield and Warren, but also in Moretown where the town center developed around the Common.

A fair amount of commerce developed between the southern Valley communities and the town of Roxbury. Mail made its way over as did grain and dry goods. In later

years, when the railroad laid tracks in Roxbury, the connection became even more important. Though we are familiar with the current Roxbury Mountain Road, it was not the earliest route over the ridge. An earlier road snaked its way over the mountain, beginning somewhere near where Cider Hill now ends.

From the High Land to the River — Hydropower Drives Commerce

We know that only a few settlers in Moretown, Warren and Waitsfield chose to settle the lowland along the Mad River, but the lure of hydropower available along the river was a magnet for many entrepreneurs. In time, commercial activity by the river accelerated. In short order, Waitsfield grew as a commercial center as mills and shops took advantage of the power of the Mill Brook as well as the Mad River.

Moretown also had a prodigious supply of hydropower. In later years, the Ward



Lumber Company, working countless acres of forest in Moretown, Duxbury and Fayston, would become the major employer in the area. Their lumber activities fed their own mills and kept Moretown village robust and alive with a host of shops and services. Unlike the other Valley communities, Moretown went on to become a “company town.” Lumber was king and the wood industry employed scores of people. Many made the village their home, living in company-owned houses and spending their wages in the company store.

The "Highway Department"...No Such Thing

In the early years, the towns, and its hired surveyors, may have assisted in the laying of roads but the maintenance of the roads was usually left in the hands of those that used them the most. Farmers generally maintained the roads that served their own farms and homesteads, though these same roads were often official town highways. But maintenance of roads was generally minimal — usually only enough to assure that they were passable. Most roads were little more than parallel wheel ruts between fields and the woods.

And things got worse in the winter.

Snow Rollers

Come winter, with horse and sleigh the primary means of travel, it became necessary to compact the snow on the roads so that horses and sleighs could make it through. This was a job for the snow roller.

Snow rollers were large wooden "barrels" — sometimes wider than a man is tall — that were mounted on an axle and attached to a large frame and yoke. Teams of oxen or horses were led by a driver down snow-covered roads and snow was compacted under the weight of the machine. As you can imagine, the process of rolling the miles of roads in town would take several days, especially after a particularly heavy storm.



Warren Town Snow Roller

The fact that little or no maintenance of roads took place in the milder months led to additional problems in the winter. Remember that roads were merely cuts through the woods. Roads were not "engineered" as we know them today. Horses, wagons and their cargo traveled in all kinds of weather and the ruts dug deeper and deeper. Eventually the fields on either side "grew" higher than the road itself. This — and the fact that stone walls came right to the edge of a farmer's property — created additional work for the men rolling the roads as the roads were forever filling with drifting snow. The teams would strain to make it through the drifts and the operators of the roller often found it necessary to get out and shovel through the piles of snow.

HAY HILLS AND MORE..

Sometimes the problem for the traveler was simply to get the horse and sleigh through the snow. The going could be tough and slow. However, the winter roads could pose another problem — icy hills could cause the sleigh and its team to lose traction and to get out of control. Conversely, the icy hill might prove impossible to climb. The answer was to spread hay on the road for traction. The hay allowed travelers to deal with the icy hills both going up and coming down. Many of these roads acquired the unofficial name "Hay Hill."

Robert Vasseur, who lives up on Bragg Hill, remembers snow rollers from the days he grew up in Fayston and recalls that rollers were commonly used on most roads. He particularly remembers a roller Perley Boyce used on Kew-Vasseur Road — one powered by oxen. Robert believes that particular roller may have ended up flattening snow on the roads in Northfield.

A Snow Roller Still Exists on Bragg Hill.

Willis Bragg came upon a roller when a fellow employee who happened to own one lost interest in owning it any further. It was a smaller model than the type normally used on town roads. It was used to maintain the roads in downtown Montpelier and we can surmise that its smaller size was more suited to navigating the narrow, twisting Montpelier streets. Willie's fascination with old machinery led him to bring the roller home to his Bragg Hill farm. Since Willie's death, his wife, Erlene, has assumed the task of preserving the roller. Though the roller now is kept in the barn, many Valley residents may remember seeing it for a while in the field outside the Bragg homestead.

Floyd Fuller of Warren left this memory of working on snow rollers to the Vermont Folklife Center.

Fuller explains that he and other family members would spend the early morning hours tending to milking and other farm chores. Then, as he puts it, "if there had been a

snowfall, one or the other of us would put four horses onto the roller and go roll the road."

Fuller continues: "If the storm was a big one, two or three of the family members would get to work and deal with the snow and, of course, the drifts. When the drift was too high "before the horses could go through it (you) had to shovel...it got crusted hard. You had to break the crust before the horses could walk through it with the roller."

The Fuller's roller was a large one — a two-barreled affair that was meant to make pretty tight turns. It may have been 5 to 6 feet in diameter. The roller was made of staves, "just like a barrel," and "built into a frame and a pole on it and a seat up top so you sit there and drive."

A pair of horses was hitched to the pole with neck yokes and a lead team was further hitched through a crossbar, or wiffletree. According to Fuller, "That was heavy. Packed the snow right down."

Most telling is Fuller's less than fond remembrance of the work: "And so my being the youngest, I used to sit on that roller and drive four horses 'till I was so cold I didn't feel cold. Believe it or not, that's the truth. Can say I'm lying, but I'm not."

From Rollers to Graders

Robert Vasseur of Fayston doesn't remember the newer "graders" being hitched up to a team of horses, but does recall that Perley Boyce, who farmed along the North Fayston Road, hitched his plow to a team of oxen. Robert believes that Perley was not the only guy in the area to power a grader with oxen and not horses.

Robert's father Leon had his own grader, a "v-plow" made of wood. Leon used this plow, which was hitched to a farm tractor, to clear snow along Kew-Vasseur Road.

Many roads were seasonal. No. 9 Hill in Fayston, for example, was only maintained in good weather to serve the Wheeler and Smith residents; it was not maintained at all in the winter.

And even with a bulldozer behind a plow, it took some time to take care of the roads that were maintained in the winter months. "After a typical storm, it took 3 to 4 days to get around town," recalls Robert.

One of the real challenges facing those who plowed the roads was the fact that the roads lay so low. With banks high on either side, it was difficult — at best — to push snow to the side. In time, towns began to raise the roads so they could be plowed, often pushing old stone walls into the road center. The wall stones were used as road fill.

(This practice came back to haunt those who had to dig into roads at a later date.

Utility workers, looking to bury lines, came upon some "tough digging" as the backhoes hooked onto some formidable boulders — old members of a farmer's wall.)

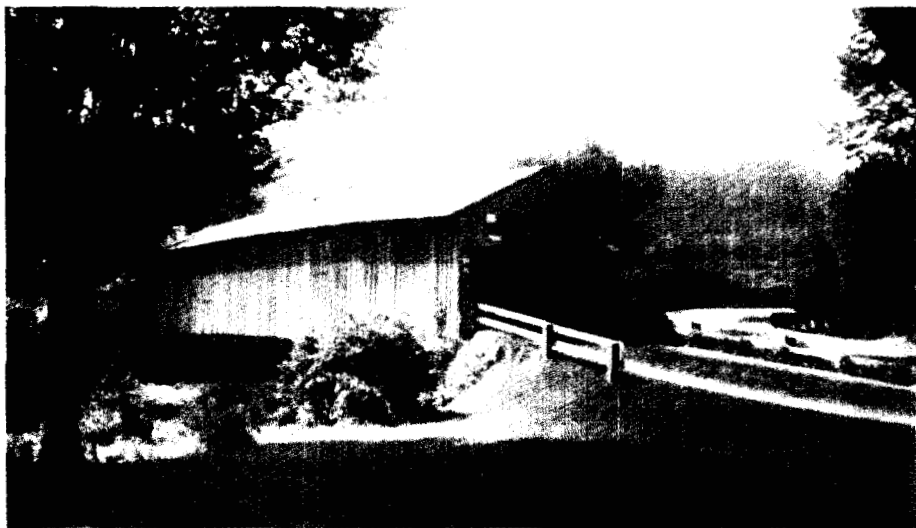
Eventually, the gasoline-powered tractor replaced the horse-driven grader. Though advanced for the time, today we would probably not be excited with the performance of those modern machines.



Workers clearing snow in an early gasoline-powered snow tractor

Building "Bridges With Roofs"

Early residents built crude bridges to cross the many area rivers and streams in the area. These bridges were often not much more than a pair of logs spanning the banks, covered with rough-hewn planks. It was well expected that the bridges would rot in time and often would be swept away after heavy rains. These bridges met the needs of those who lived on isolated farms, but were unsatisfactory when it came to the more heavily traveled town roads.



The bridge at the Great Eddy Waitfield

In 1806, reality hit home. A major flood hit the Valley and damaged or destroyed most bridges in the area. Town officials, wanting to avoid the expense of replacing bridges, determined that the covered bridge was an attractive option. This form of bridge is not original to Vermont, or even to New England. The first covered bridge — a three-arched structure — was built in Philadelphia in 1804. Though unlike the Pennsylvania bridge, the bridges erected in the Valley are typical of those found throughout New England.

Three of the original Mad River Valley covered bridges still remain and are well preserved. Others fell victim to age and flooding.

A "Half-Covered Bridge"

A covered bridge once crossed the Mad River south of the present Kingsbury iron bridge. It had an interesting design. One half of the bridge, crossing the main part of the stream was covered, but a whole section of the bridge was without a roof. The bridge was notorious for its sharp turns at each end, but the road was re-aligned when the new iron bridge was erected.



Covered bridge and kingpost bridge which once crossed the Mad River in Warren before the 1927 flood, just north of the Sugarbush turn.

The Warren Village Bridge, or Lincoln Gap Bridge

Walter Bagley owned a clapboard mill in "South Hollow" in Warren. In 1872, Bagley was hired to build a bridge over the Mad River, from Warren Village to the Lincoln Road.

The resulting 60 foot-long Warren Village bridge is of Queenpost design. This particular bridge is unique in two ways. First, the interior trusses are enclosed and shielded from the elements. In addition, the two portals differ; the entrance to the east extends further over the approaching highway than the western end.



Warren Village Bridge

The Pine Brook Bridge

The Pine Brook Bridge is on the North Road in Waitsfield. Built in 1872, this bridge is a 48 foot-long bridge of kingpost design, one of two wooden kingpost bridges remaining in the state. Milton Graton and Son substantially restored it in 1976, a New Hampshire based engineering firm that specialized in covered bridges.

By the 70s, the bridge was in a sad state, with deck supports rotting and the deck itself sagging severely. In order to retain the bridge's historic integrity and to minimize visual impact, Graton laid two parallel steel beams about one inch below the bridge. These beams, which spanned the river between the support piers on each side, would carry the weight of the bridge and its load should the bridge become overloaded. Other than that, the beams remained out of sight.

The Village or "Big Eddy" Bridge

In 1796, a bridge was built over the "Big Eddy," a swirl in the Mad River where it flows through the village. Now the second oldest remaining covered bridge in the state, the "Big Eddy," or Village Bridge has undergone numerous repairs; it has suffered damage by fire, flood and oversized vehicles. The Big Eddy bridge was built before a village was established along the banks of the river. It is interesting to note,

however, that there was a small, hand-operated grist mill on the site. This grist mill served the needs of local residents who needed to grind grain for their personal needs.

In 1973, the engineering firm of Milton Graton and Sons replaced the deck structure, the flooring and the upper lateral bracing. Graton also replaced "knee braces," wooden supports actually harvested from timbers where branches meet the main tree member.

Walter E. Jones, a prominent Waitsfield merchant, remembered the "Big Eddy" bridge as something magical, something more than utilitarian. He writes in this article that appeared in Vermont Life magazine.

"It was close behind this old bridge that I was born and grew along into manhood — it is a sturdy bridge built by sturdy men and as I gaze at its picture, standing here on my desk, long lines of boyhood memories come floating back to me.

It was the community house for boys on rainy days — no reading room, no piano, no easy chairs, no dances, but plenty of other things to keep a live boy busy. A very decent place it was to run off short sprints...sprints held in spite of those stern signboards at either end threatening a fine of \$2.00 for passing "through this bridge faster than a walk." ... There were dusty timbers to climb and clamber over and initials to carve with the stub of a jackknife.

...There were those dingy glass boxes, one at each end, made to hold the still dingier kerosene lamps supposed to light the dark cavern at night, but which instead, with the strange and spooky shadows of flying bugs and moths wavering on the timbers brought fear and trembling to the timid little travelers whose own legs lengthened before him and then chased him from behind until he reached the welcome exit."

Carrying Freight and Mail

The mail was the connection to the outside world and, for quite some time, mail and goods came to the southern end of the Valley from Roxbury. Wagons and the stage made the crossing of the gap on a regular basis.

In 1827, a stage route was established between Waitsfield and Middlesex, with stops in Moretown. By 1907, there were two daily stages running the route. The stage became a vital link between the Valley and the railroad line that had a station in Middlesex.

Many area residents were surprised and delighted to see it during last year's 100th Anniversary celebration of the Telephone Company's beginning. Most of us know

that Waitsfield Telecom has a remarkable collection of telephone equipment that spans a century, but not everyone is aware that a stagecoach sits in its Waitsfield warehouse, surrounded by antique telephones and switchboards.

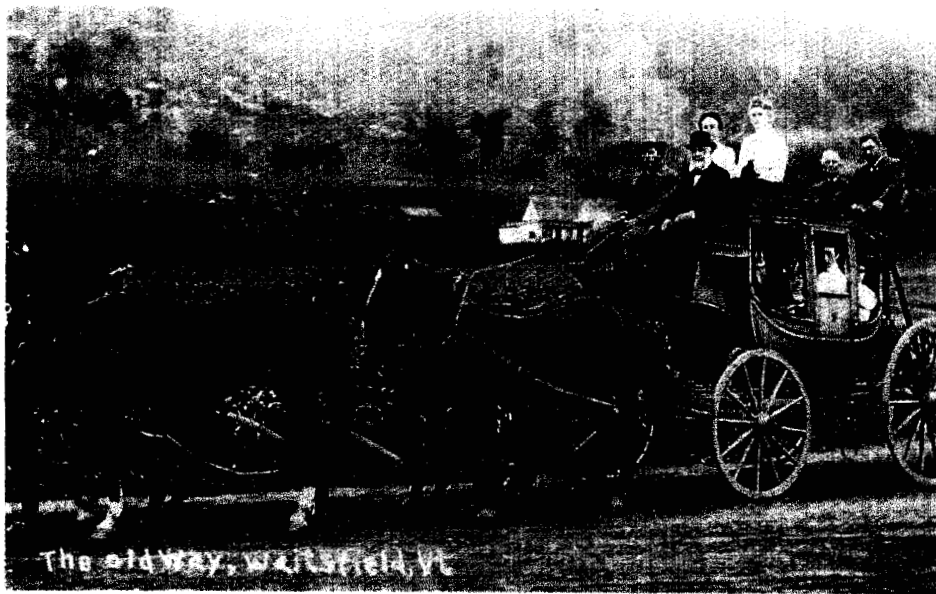


Stage drivers who ran the Roxbury Mountain route pose in this 1889 group photo.

From Horses to Gasoline

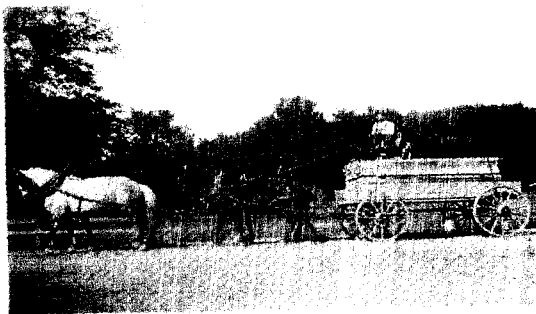
Jack Smith remembers his father and uncle's business. They were teamsters and were in the business of hauling "anything anywhere." They used the horse-drawn wagon you see pictured.

In time, as business grew, they decided to replace their horse-drawn wagon with a gasoline powered truck; it would be the first in the Mad River Valley.



F.J. Kelly's Mad River Coach

The truck was a 1910 Kissel "Freighter" and the Smiths bought it for around \$2,500 — quite a sum in those days. There were no Kissel dealerships in Vermont, so the brothers needed to order the truck from a dealership in Boston.



The Smith freight wagon on Main Street in Waitsfield.

From Dirt to Asphalt

The automobile became crucial to the economic future of the Mad River Valley, but also brought sweeping changes. From a sleepy farming community, the area found itself playing host to skiers and, more recently it also grew as a bedroom community, home to commuters and self-employed entrepreneurs.

It took years, and the change was gradual, but it came anyway. The main street along the Valley floor was paved with asphalt — mile by mile. So was Route 17, saving skiers miles of travel. Route 100 was re-routed over Duxbury Hill, creating yet another highway, Route 100B. The Interstate highway made the world a whole lot smaller, and before long an airport was but an hour away. We were steering toward the fast lane.



The first truck in the Mad River Valley owned by Josiah Smith with Herbert Smith at the wheel.

But it is still possible to get off the tarmac and tour one of the Valley's many back roads and forget you are part of a new century.

GETTING TO THE GARDEN — A TRANSPORTATION STORY

Today we zip around — patience is not a player in our daily mission. We may complain if the snow plow is running late, making us — heaven forbid! — to get outside and do a little shoveling.

With this observation I will share a little story. My family and I live in a house in Moretown built by Kenneth Ward of the Ward Lumber Company. Before she passed away, our next door neighbor was Ailene Ward, of the same Ward family.

Mrs. Ward, it turns out, was originally from New Jersey, though you most likely would mistake her for a native "Vermont" — she looked and acted all the part.

Mrs. Ward was in her 90s when we got to know her. Yet when snow and ice storms hit, she was out in the morning — often before we finished our first morning coffee — taking care of the "mess" in her driveway. Although she had hired people to maintain the drive, she was determined to get a head start on things.

But this was not because she was impatient. Mrs. Ward saw a job that needed doing. So she brought out the shovel and ice chopper and got to work. Very slowly, but not missing a chunk, she cleared small patches of her driveway even though she had no intention of driving anywhere on a stormy day. I was impressed.

Ailene Ward went to Florida for a few months each winter and so traveled little in Vermont during the worst of the winter weather. But she loved so her Moretown home and yard, and in the summer you always could find Mrs. Ward tending to her gardens and "supervising" her lawn crew.

Spending hours in the warm summer sun can take its toll on anyone, but Mrs. Ward took care of that problem. With a big smile she would cruise on to her backyard garden patch in her vehicle of choice: a canopied golf cart...a Harley Davidson golf cart! The kids in the neighborhood were impressed — some even got to ride with Mrs. Ward on her Harley.

I never got a ride, but I wish I had. It seems like a fun way to have faced a little challenge of getting around. Not like the challenges of the "Good Old Days."

A word of gratitude is owed to the many people who shared their time and their memories. Additional thanks go out to the people who donated photographs to this project. They include "Kir" Hartshorn, Kenton and Fran Blair, Jack Smith, Ken Quackenbush and the Moretown Historical Society.

— Rick Haynes