



# Sheep, Shops, Cows and Trees - And, Lest We Forget, Lawyers

## *A History of Commerce in the Mad River Valley*

Written by Jan Pogue

Researched by Jan Pogue and Eleanor Haskin

Edited by Tammy Field





She sold the cow the day he died. The stove went a few days later. The sink, sugaring utensils, and tools she kept, either for sentimental or for practical reasons – a woman still in her prime could be expected to hand those over to another husband, if and when the right man came on her horizon.

The sales posed a legal conundrum. Her husband, John Walton, had left Waitsfield in 1870, made his Last Will and Testament in Illinois while visiting his daughter, and came back to Vermont in 1876, perhaps thinking



*The cow just had to go . . .*

he was on his last days. He rallied, wed his first wife's sister, Electa, in September and died in Tunbridge nine months later. His Will and its executor were in Illinois, his wife was in Vermont, and his debts were in Waitsfield. And therein was the problem: when a wife in Vermont sells a cow owned by a man who once lived in Illinois, can she buy a gravestone in Tunbridge rather than pay off old debts in Waitsfield?

In this case, John Walton, a blacksmith, owed Ira Richardson, one of Waitsfield's leading citizens and a state senator, an unnamed sum of money. When Walton died, his wife claimed a lot of things that were never included in the Will – including the cow and the stove, as well as an allowance for what she paid in funeral expenses – all of which left Richardson more or less twisting in the wind. One lawyer sued; one lawyer defended. Ultimately, the Vermont Supreme Court decided that when a widow meddles with her husband's estate, she is "chargeable with the highest legal rate of interest" on unpaid debts.

Even one hundred thirty-three years ago, such questions were the stuff of business, town talk, and, for Richardson, the very real estimate of a man's worth and reputation.

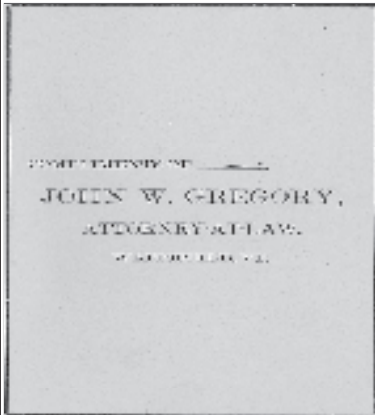




In the end, a valley first settled by an ex-soldier, populated with more sheep than people, home to hardy, self-reliant farmers, sawmill operators, wooden barrel makers, and merchants of shoes, shirts, and metal pots, many of whom lived such simple lives that a dollar was seldom earned and a flood could wipe out a whole industry, made legal history.



*Butter tubs were made at a cooperage in Warren.*



*Advertisement from the Old Home Week Souvenir Book, dated Aug. 11-17, 1901*

It's enough to make you love lawyers – for where there are lawyers, there is business being conducted and money being made. As Matt Bushnell Jones describes in his 1908 History of Waitsfield, “An hour spent among the discarded papers of a town clerk’s office will disclose old writs almost by the bushel, and one soon learns that in the first half of the nineteenth century creditors were less merciful, neighborly disputes went more frequently to law, and small litigation was far more prevalent than now.”

Waitsfield was the first of the four Mad River Valley villages settled in the late 1700s, followed during the next decade by Moretown, Warren, and Fayston. They were peaceful villages, devoid of almost any development except scattered self-sustaining farms, cleared by hardy pioneers eager to make a living from the sometimes thin, often rocky, soil of the Valley.

The stories that come out of those years include bear trappings in Waitsfield and flash floods up and down the Valley – labeled “freshets” when the river and its tributary streams overran their banks after a heavy rain or a spring thaw. There were tragic accidents at sawmills;





frequent scares about possible attacks from the Native Americans; and a charming tale of a benighted, midnight search for buried Spanish gold in Fayston led by a man with mystical powers and a magical rod cut from the branch of a witch-hazel bush. Women baked bread once a week in community ovens in Moretown, and Samuel Austin, one of the fifty-eight residents of Warren in 1800, ran a distillery in town at a time when a “toddy” was considered a necessity in every family to keep out both the cold and the heat. (Austin’s distillery operation was so successful that he finally got caught for not having a license, and his brother had to pay a \$150 fee.)

Like much of the rest of Vermont, the commercial and industrial development of the four towns leaned first toward agriculture, then toward lumber – the only two ways of hopefully feeding a family. In the census of 1820, Vermont was largely filled up with farms, and eighty-five



*Early farmhouse believed to be childhood home of Sterling Livingston on Tucker Hill in Fayston*

percent of Vermonters were farming their land. In all of Washington County, there were only 271 manufacturing establishments in 1880, employing about 865 people and paying them annually \$271,217 in wages, or \$313.55 a piece. The Valley itself never became much of a manufacturing area. Although timber and grist mills offered occasional work during the cropless winter, getting hard currency into the Valley was a difficult prospect.

Industry, the type that brought granite quarries to Barre, river commerce to Burlington, and textile mills to Winooski, eluded the remote, mountainous, and flood-prone Valley. It wasn’t until the years after 1948, when the first ski resort was built in Fayston, that the Valley even turned toward a very modern industry, tourism.





Commercial development of the communities themselves – inns and taverns, shops and stores, lawyers and doctors – came slowly. Waitsfield had its first store about 1801, run by two out-of-towners who bought land from Waitsfield founder Gen. Benjamin Wait. Later, the town became a thriving commercial center, attracting people like John Walton, who set up his blacksmith shop in 1838, located just a bit before the parsonage of the town's Congregational Church.

Here, Walter A. Jones opened a dry goods shop in 1850 that was tended by generations of the Jones family. Here, Hastings Stafford Campbell in 1873 set himself apart from the two other mercantile shops in town by describing himself as a dealer of “fancy...staples” that included “gents and boys clothing.” Here, Orville M. Eaton sold meat, and Andrew Wheatley Bigelow followed his father in the harness making business, expanding his interests by opening the Noble Irish Hotel and livery stable at least as early



*A typical blacksmith (drawn by  
Stefanie LaRock)*

**An Old Landmark**

Filed full of attractive and up-to-date goods, but it's what we DO that  
...advertises US, not what we SAY...

**WALTER E. JONES,**  
DEALER IN

**Clothing, Dry Goods, Boots and Shoes,  
Ladies' and Gent's Furnishings,  
Groceries, Hardware Etc.,**

WAITSFIELD, VT.

*Advertisement from the Old Home Week Souvenir  
Book, dated August 11-17, 1901*







as 1888. Here, two brothers, busy running a store, a mill, a farm, and a tannery, strung a wire between the house of one (now the Waitsfield Inn) and the store of another (now Inverness) to communicate with one another. Though the mechanism was hardly useful for long distance, it was the forerunner of a much more sophisticated



*Example of an early "string phone"*

telephone system – the one that currently supplies your own phone and internet service, Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom.

Fayston, whose own rough topography prevented it from establishing a village center, depended on nearby towns for all the needs that couldn't be supplied on their farms. But Warren and Moretown, though never as large as Waitsfield, both had small but thriving business communities.

As described in the 1882 *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* – quite literally the bible of Vermont's early history – Warren was "quite a village. There are some 50 dwelling-houses, 1 church, 1 schoolhouse, a very good one, 3 stores, 2 boot and shoe shops, 1 tannery, 5 blacksmith shops, 2 clap-board mills, 2 sawmills, 1 grist-mill, 3 carriage shops, 1 harness-shop, 1 tin-shop, 2 cooper-shops, 2 clothes-pins shops, 1 gunsmith, 1 millinary (cq) shop, a tavern and post-office." And Moretown, on the other end of the county, added its own dash and flash with a hotel, a goldsmith, and a dress maker. Traveling in the mid 1800s from Warren to Waitsfield to Fayston and Moretown, on unpaved roads that turned icy and snowy enough in winter to require runners on horse-drawn carts and treacherous enough in spring to require hip-boots to make it through the mud, you could buy a hat in Warren, get your horse shod





in Waitsfield, and find a hotel and a new dress in Moretown – and have spectacular views in Fayston.

But all of these were later developments, after the men and women who first settled the Valley began to see a way to bring real coinage to their lonely farms.

## **The growth of the sheep industry**

Back in the day, you could tell a lot about how a man was making a living by looking at his barn.

According to state historians, the Valley's early farmers built their barns based on a traditional design the original colonists brought with them from England. Those barns were about thirty feet



*Sheep farming was an important industry in the Mad River Valley.*

by forty feet with a pair of large, hinged wagon doors on the long side and unpainted vertical boards on the walls. Hay and grain storage was on one side, animal stables on another. As Vermont farmers began to adapt to the harsh New England winters, they changed the shape of the barns to what's known as the Yankee barn, buildings with windows for light, a tighter board-and-batten, clapboard or shingle sheathings for the exterior, all built on a hillside so that manure could be pushed into a basement below for storage.

All that changed again when Vermonters found a new cash crop: wool.

The rough hillsides and climate of the state were especially suited for sheep, and farmers first used them for the dual purposes of mutton and wool for the family, much as their few cows and chickens supplied milk,





meat, and eggs. As textile mills opened in New England cities, Vermont farmers began to raise sheep specifically for wool, putting it on wagons for the long trip to the mills.

Sheep farming developed into an industry that gave Vermont national prominence, first for the production of wool and later for its superior sheep breeding. For a few decades, the production of wool fiber for mills, both in Vermont and in southern New England, was the mainstay of Vermont agriculture. In Warren, one resident was even lauded as the first resident in town to have a wool rug. Waitsfield records in 1803 show there were 679 sheep and 165 cows in town. Until 1804, there was even a statute on town books “to encourage the increase of sheep” and giving taxpayers a dollar deduction from his tax levels for every one of his own sheep sheared between May 10 and June 20.

Barns, the witness to man’s changing interest, were adapted from about the 1820s to the 1870s to shelter sheep. The sheep-friendly barns typically consisted of two levels and were often built onto a bank. Sheep were housed on the ground floor, which opened to a fenced pasture with southern exposure.

Yet it was a short-lived flurry: by the 1840s competition from other areas and economic conditions led to a decrease in sheep farming. Instead, farmers found success in contented Vermont cows.

### **Raising Bessie**

The Vermont state seal is the only one in the nation that in any way recognizes the dairy industry. Plows appear on thirteen state seals, sheaves of wheat on nine, but Vermont stands alone in her recognition of the dairy industry, with a horned brown cow happily sharing space with a tall pine tree.



*Vermont State Seal*

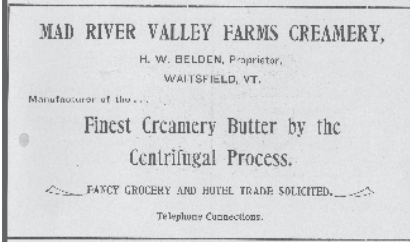






Cows had been in New England all the way back to Plymouth Colony. Farmers needed one or two of them to produce milk and butter for their own families. Stores of cheese and butter were often “put down” in the warm months when the cows were most productive, to be

consumed during the following year. Members of the family were assigned the laborious job of hand churning the butter or transforming some of the milk into cheese.



*C. M.  
Richardson's  
Butter  
Room  
pictured  
above.*

But at the same time the wool industry was declining, the butter industry was expanding, aided in large part by new technologies that made it easier for

farmers to produce more milk and sell more milk products. First, it was the introduction of centralized creameries, where farmers brought their cream to be made into butter. Warren, Waitsfield, and Moretown all listed creameries as among their businesses in the late 1800s. Waitsfield's was first opened in 1893, built at a cost of \$1,500; later, that building was used as a basketball facility for the high school from 1938 to 1941. Four years after that first creamery, a number of farmers organized the Waitsfield Co-operative Creamery, erecting buildings on the main road and setting up skimming stations on roads out of town, to make it easier for the farmers to reach.





The creamery in Moretown was in operation until the mid 1930s and was managed by Birney Griffith. A spring on this property furnished the creamery with ice-cold water to keep the butter cold. The one in Warren was located one-fourth mile from the East Warren four corners. Later, the town farmers there formed a co-op that built a creamery, a long set of buildings with a shop at the end that was run by Harlow Abels.

The creameries were “high tech” for their era. Clifford Wallis describes the later operation of the Waitsfield co-operative creamery in Richard M. Bisbee’s *History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont, 1789–2000*: “The churn was a very large cylindrical power-driven cylinder...about five feet in diameter and maybe six feet long. It would churn out probably three or four hundred pounds of butter in one churning.” The building had overhead shafts, pulleys, and belts that drove the equipment, all run by a gasoline engine. There was a large building in the back to store ice blocks cut from the river that were coated with sawdust to help retard melting.

Valley farmers embraced dairies and their subsequent products wholeheartedly. A writer in Fayston describing her town in 1898 bragged, “There are many fine dairies in town,” and a

Moretown writer noted in 1860 that the town was “quite a dairy town, some farmers having twenty or more cows.” One of those was the Howes Farm on the Common, established in the 1860s and still in operation today.

Other technologies made milk stay fresh longer. Better refrigeration and transportation increased the distance that fluid milk could go before it spoiled. By the 1920s, Vermont was the leading supplier of fluid milk to Boston, and the processes of homogenization and pasteurization



*Richard Buzzell bringing milk down to the milk truck*





improved the quality and consumer confidence of fluid milk. By 1934, cream and butter production gave way entirely to milk. In 1952, the first bulk tank was installed in Vermont. Bulk tanks allowed farmers to keep their milk cool on site while awaiting pickup by a larger milk truck.



*Alden Bettis collected milk from farmers to take to the creamery.*

Numbers tell the story of the turn toward dairies in a most dramatic way: in 1880, according to the census that year, there were no Vermont businesses producing cheese, butter, or condensed milk. Twenty years later, there were 255 businesses for dairy products, generating \$5.6 million in revenue.



*Round Barn at East Warren Four Corners*

Once the majority of Valley farmers moved toward dairy farming, barns changed to huge multi-storied bank barns sheathed with clapboards and with elaborate wooden ventilator cupolas, often topped by decorative weathervanes. Later, round barns like the one at Round Barn Inn in Waitsfield built in 1910, were introduced that included a silo in the center meant to save labor by having all the cows facing into a central feeding point.

### **A boon of natural resources**

Valley residents, minus the easy access to cities and transportation that other areas boasted, had always been resourceful, making use of



everything around them to keep them in this hard-scrabble but beautiful place.

John Somerville, a well-to-do Waitsfield farmer, reported in 1880 that his family raised hay, corn, oats, wheat, potatoes, and apples. More



Early maple sugaring operation

impressively, they processed their own products and produced 3,000 pounds of butter, 175 pounds of cheese, 800 pounds of maple sugar, 50 bushels of apples, and 35 cords of wood.

Although they didn't invent maple sugaring (that credit goes to the Eastern

Woodland Indians, who traded maple sugar with the first European settlers), Vermonters figured out that tapping sugar maples in the spring could bring both a sweetness to their lives as well as others, helping them earn hard currency. The same Fayston writer who bragged about the town's "fine dairies" also noted the "very many sugar orchards and the best quality of maple syrup and sugar made, which brings a handsome income to Fayston farmers."

Yet it wasn't the sap from the trees that was most noted by the first Valley residents. It was the trees themselves, and what they could be turned into that became the biggest industry along the Mad River and in Vermont.

Since the typical homestead tract, or "pitch," consisted of one to two hundred acres of nearly impenetrable virgin forest, one of the settlers' first tasks was land clearing. These pioneers soon realized that the heaps of wood ashes they were producing could be converted into "black





gold” worth hard cash. Hardwoods like elm, ash, sugar maple, hickory, and beech were necessary to make potash, an impure form of potassium carbonate made from recovering the ashes after wood is burned. Potash was an essential ingredient for making soap,



*Clarrisa Colby in Fayston making potash  
for soap*

glass, and saltpeter, used to produce gunpowder. “Fulling sope” was much needed to wash wool before it was woven in the burgeoning textile mills, and settlers discovered the ashes from a single tree could bring a cash-short farmer up to four dollars.

Since farmers cleared their land mostly by slash-and-burn, the ashes from huge open fires of hardwood logs were gathered and leached, and the resulting solution was then simply boiled down and melted into crude black potash. Besides the necessary ashes and leaching vat, the critical element of this backwoods technology was the use of a thick-walled potash kettle, or “kittle.” Before Ethan Allen began his adventures in Vermont with the Green Mountain Boys, he and his brothers had an ironworks in Salisbury, Connecticut, that specialized in potash kettles, and many of them can still be found around New England.

This home-grown process was widely promoted during the American Revolution to increase gunpowder supplies. Gunpowder required saltpeter (potassium nitrate), made from potash and nitrogen-rich dung, such as bat guano. By the post-Revolutionary period potash manufacture had become a standard part of New England farming. Potash works were established in every village – there were several in Waitsfield alone







– to take the ashes and convert them. Prominent Waitsfield businessman Roderick Richardson may have opened the first one in 1806 when he erected a potash to care for ashes he took in trade at his mercantile store; clearly, potash was as good as gold to him.

Yet there was another, even more lucrative use for all that wood, and Hiram Ward – known mostly as H.O. – was just the man to capitalize on it.

### **A family business**

The forests of Vermont, the clothing of green that met the state's first settlers, inspired the explorer Samuel de Champlain to declare, "Voila les verts monts" - "Behold the green mountaints." Zadock Thompson, in his "History of Vermont," published in 1842, gave a list that went on for two pages of forest trees native to Vermont.

Yet the trees were mainly an impediment to settlers, who wanted cleared land for planting and lumber for building.

The sawmill -- primitive and dangerous -- accompanied every permanent settlement. The first of these mills was put up in Vermont

in 1738 or 1739 in Westminster; by 1840, Vermont had 1,081 sawmills. Although the records are unclear, Waitsfield's General Wait may have had the first sawmill in town, just east of the present High Bridge on Clay Brook, a shallow



*Moriarty Saw Mill, located at the bottom of  
Mill Hill, Waitsfield*

stream that flows from Scrag Mountain and into the Mad River, and an area still referred to as Mill Hill that formed a busy economic center in early Waitsfield.





A veteran lumberman, describing his trade in a magazine story published in 1886, noted, "As to machinery in the early days, I might as well say there



*H. O. Ward*

was none. Sawmills were built on small streams where the water could be easily handled. The frame of the mill was built of large hewed timber and very strongly braced; as a general thing, nothing but the roof was boarded. The power to drive the mill was created by a dam to hold the water with a fall of about ten feet, ...It required a large amount of power to manufacture lumber at that time, part of the machinery being in a crude state. I have heard the noise of a sawmill two miles away."

Thus was the life that H.O. Ward entered sometime around 1870, first in Duxbury, then in Moretown. Ward, son of Earl and Elizabeth

(Munson) Ward, was born in Duxbury in 1842. He was an educated man, receiving his education in district schools and Barre Academy, then graduating from Eastman Business College. In about 1866 he married Mary A. Smith, of Hopkinton, N. Y., and they had three sons.



*Ward Lower Mill*

Ward built his first mill in Duxbury on the Dowsville Brook, located across from what is now Harwood Union High School. He purchased the surrounding land for timber, then kept looking around for other mill sites, places on a stream or river where the flow of water and the head (vertical drop) of that flow would create the most force to provide energy, to drive the waterwheel that would turn the saw.

In the early 1870s Ward purchased a gristmill in Moretown, located on the site of the current Clapboard Mill (which is still in operation). He





operated that mill, then built two more, the Lower and Upper mills. He made Moretown the home base for the Ward Lumber Company, and moved into the family home, a large Victorian



*Moretown village, north end looking up Moretown Common Road - in foreground is Ward Clapboard Mill, known as the lower mill*

house which still stands on the Main Street (Route 100) in Moretown. Horse barns that housed the horse teams for the logging wagons were behind the home.

Ward Lumber was the town's biggest employer, with millions of pieces of lumber from the mill going to cities in New England and New York. The lumber operation was what the company itself, in its authorized history, calls a "complex operation at the least." Since everything was done by hand, the mills were extremely labor intensive. They called for the skills and hard labor of strong men who worked in extreme conditions of weather to keep the mills operational.

Nothing was tougher than the work demanded of the loggers. As the Ward company history describes it, "These men went up into the hills, cut the trails, spent days and weeks up at camp, and cut, limbed and loaded logs weighing thousands of pounds. Their only source of support was their teams of horses who were trained to take the logs down to the header and return by themselves to the logger in the woods. From the header, the horses were driven down from the mountains, loaded with logs and a man riding the logs trying to keep the horses ahead of the incredibly heavy load barreling down behind them."

The company kept horse-drawn wagons until 1945, long after trucks became the mode of transport. One of the last great teamsters was





Sam Farnsworth, who apparently had no patience for modern truck transportation. He proved his point one day when a ten-wheel truck loaded with 30,000 pounds of logs got stuck in the mud at the mill and could not get out. Sam hitched up his best team of horses, attached them to the front axle of the truck and helped pull the truck and its 30,000 pound load out of the muck.

Although Ward Lumber was the biggest, there were mills up and down the Mad River. Sawmills in Fayson made planks for houses, butter tubs in Moretown, lumber and picture frames in Waitsfield, and clapboards in Warren.



*Warren Village Mill*

There were few families that didn't take some part in the logging and sawmill industry: Levi Seaver owned a sawmill in Fayson where he employed as many as eight men working twelve hours per day in summer and seven hours per day in winter. A Somerville son in Waitsfield gave up the farm and went for logging. The Ford and Blair families in Warren were both known for their lumber mills.

The danger in all this was that the Mad River Valley, like much of Vermont, was being relentlessly stripped of its trees. By 1870, it is estimated that Vermont was seventy percent cleared and only thirty percent forest. Huge white pines, often six feet in diameter and 250 feet in height, all but disappeared. The sugar maple was so diminished that it was for a while found in only a few inaccessible spots. If H.O. Ward couldn't see this, his son, Burton, certainly could when he took over the business. He was labeled, in a 1931 issue of the magazine *The Vermonter*, as a "consistent champion of Vermont," in great part because of his interest in conservation.





Burton Ward became a huge proponent for forest restoration, planting over 600,000 trees in twenty years, more than any other individual in the state. Some in Moretown may still remember being part of the planting junkets that happened in the spring. Young seedlings, purchased from the State Forestry Service, were planted row after row by town



*Lumber workers skidding logs with horses*

residents. The mills closed down during the planting so that everyone could participate. This reforestation not only replenished the forest lands, but it helped protect the water tables; some of those

trees are just now being harvested, and almost seventy percent of Vermont is now covered in trees – a reversal of the figure from 1870.

Today, the Ward Clapboard Mill is run by H.O. Ward's great-great grandson, Holly Ward. The clapboards that come from this mill are still sawn by the original machines.

### **Income from the rocks**

Although dairy farming and lumber were by far the biggest industries in the Valley, what lay below the earth had its own place in the Valley economy. The Valley didn't get the granite deposits that made Barre a magnet for Italian workers familiar with taking that rock out of the ground. But deposits of talc, which in 1992 was declared the official state mineral, were found in several areas of Vermont, including Moretown. In 1913, the Eastern Magnesia Talc Co. purchased 125 acres in the Rock Bridge area of North Moretown, located along the Winooski River on the old D.P. Deavitt farm.







From then until its closing in 1961, the company extracted rare, high-grade talc, suitable for cutting into pencils used by metal workers; by 1931, talc coming from the mine, with a horizontal shaft a mile and a half long, was the largest manufacturer of the talc pencils. It was also the first company to introduce electric haulage for mine cars.

The mine employed about thirty-five to fifty people from both Moretown and nearby Waterbury. The company owned a boarding house and four talc mine homes, where employees and their families lived and worked. According to a granddaughter of two talc workers, in the early years the company had a horse-drawn wagon that would go into Montpelier from Moretown every Monday, to pick up miners who had been thrown in jail over the weekend.

In 1961, when talc was being converted to liquid instead of powder, this plant was closed because the source of the talc, being about one mile from the mill, caused the mill operation to become too expensive. Even today, Vermont still ranks second in output among the ten states that produce talc.

### **Spending all that money (and making more)**

If they weren't rolling in dough – even in 1900, the average Vermont resident was only making a few hundred dollars a year – the farmers and lumbermen of the Valley wanted a place to spend their money on things they couldn't make or gather themselves.

The Valley residents liked to drink. In 1822, Moretown's Simon Stevens built a distillery and made whiskey; when he died two years later, his death was considered a very great loss to the community.

They liked to shop. Waitsfield in 1904 had somewhere between ten and twelve different stores advertised in that year's *Walton's Vermont Register*,



*Waitsfield Village photo showing early businesses*

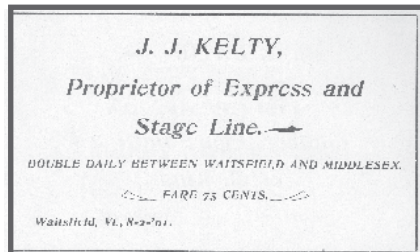


places where you could buy furniture from F. A. Boyce and jewelry from W. E. Jones.

They liked to travel. John Kelty of J.J. Kelty Stage Coach ran his teamster business between Waitsfield and the Middlesex train station two times a day for 75 cents each way.

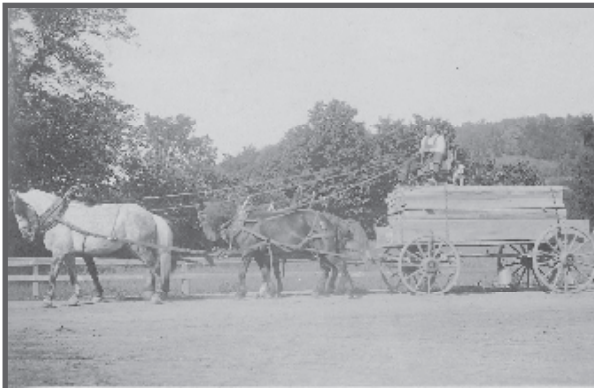
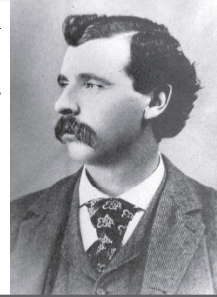
They liked getting their hair cut at the barber shop and playing a few games of billiards in the ell of the old Warren House (now the Warren Store.) If they were traveling and couldn't make it home – and were feeling flush – they might have a meal in the Bragg House in the center of the village.

They liked things new and exciting. Josiah Smith of Waitsfield, father to Herbert and grandfather of current Waitsfield resident Jack Smith, started a freight hauling business in the late 1880s. The four-horse team



*Advertisement  
in the Old Home  
Week Souvenir  
Book, dated Aug.  
11-17, 1901*

*J. J. Kelty*



*The Smiths hauled lumber to the train station in Middlesex and brought back furniture, hardware, dry goods or whatever was needed.*

made the long trip up and back in about twelve hours. In 1914, the Smiths replaced the team with a state-of-the-art truck, a Kissel Kar, the first one seen in the Valley. Manufactured by Louis Kissel and his two sons, George and William, in Hartford, Wisconsin, the Kar was renowned for its advanced design





and outstanding performance; although few now exist, Kissel Kars are still highly collectible.

And they were entrepreneurial in spirit. John “Johnny” Buzzell, a Waitsfield butcher by trade, ran Buzzell’s Meat Cart from 1910 to 1938. He started early each Tuesday and Thursday, loading his car with meat, groceries, fruit, and bakery goods – bakery goods that never included chocolate cake, which he didn’t like and wouldn’t give to his customers because he felt it was “not fit to eat.”

His route took him to some of the local lumber camps around Warren and on other mountain roads on the way to Rochester, as much as fifty miles round trip. It was a route he took in every season except deep winter – including the Mud Season, Vermont’s unofficial fifth season, when many trips included a mandatory tow by a nearby farmer’s team of horses. There were more obvious dangers on the road, especially in the evenings. When passing through Granville Woods late at night, returning with two or three hundred dollars, he would encounter obstacles on the road, intentionally put there to force him to stop and make him vulnerable to robbing.

Another clever man named David C. Holt of Moretown made part of his living in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a solver of mathematical brain twisters. Although he did many things – he was a teacher, sold logs to sawmills, did some surveying, and contributed correspondence to Montpelier’s *Argus and Patriot* newspaper – his real prowess was at “ciphering.” He calculated the number of leaves that fall in autumn, figured the years in which the Presidential inauguration would fall on Sundays for the next eight centuries, estimated the number of beans in a jar.

His passion, though, was for figuring interest. He wrote and published a booklet entitled *The Farmer’s and Business Man’s Guide to Reckoning by the Simplest and Best Methods*, which he sold for 25 cents and reported good sales. He constructed a series of intricate mathematical brain twisters that appeared in the *Argus and Patriot* and that made him a





household name. In 1902 he wrote another fourteen-page booklet called *David C. Holt's Method of Annual Interest and Difficult Calculating by the Decimal Scale*, which contained tables for computing interest by the year, by the month, and by the day. When he died in 1910 at the age of eighty-three, the local newspaper described his as a "lightning calculator."

### **Famous, if not rich**

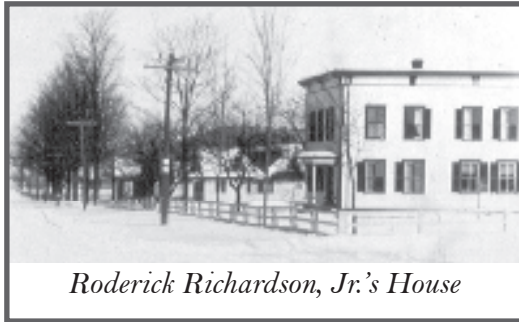
Abby Hemenway in her 1882 *History of Washington County* reported that in Waitsfield, "There are no men of immense fortunes in town, but a number who have become wealthy in the popular, Vermont sense, by cultivating their farms and by mercantile employments. There are scarcely any families who are not able to live comfortably."

Yet another historian described what he called the "Mad River Valley boys" who developed "the habit...of becoming senators and representatives."

Roderick Richardson, born in Connecticut, found his wealth in Waitsfield when he set up a mercantile shop on the northern side of the town common, and then went on to help erect the mills in the village. As the town grew, he constructed another store on the village square and went into business with his son, Roderick Jr., for a time calling his store Roderick Richardson & Son. At his death, Roderick Sr. owned the Benjamin Wait farm.

His son had become an enormously successful businessman in town, as well as a state senator. He purchased and lived in what

is now the Waitsfield Inn, a former church parsonage. Among the things Roderick Jr. did after buying the old parsonage was to convert its barn into a dairy that continued to operate for one hundred and twenty years.



*Roderick Richardson, Jr.'s House*





## Sued anyone lately?

All of this business, of course, meant a boon for the local lawyers.

Matt Bushnell Jones, in his *History of Waitsfield*, identified the first of the lawyers as John Burdick, a man known more as a “pettifogger” – a man who quibbles or raises annoying petty objections – rather than a trained lawyer. Burdick, stout and somewhat florid, often came up against his match from Edmund Rice and Roger Buckley of Moretown, trying cases before early Waitsfield settlers Jennison Jones or his brother, “Squire Matt” Jones.



The attorneys were often both important men in the towns and colorful characters.

Benjamin H. Adams began to practice law in Waitsfield in 1839 and stayed there until his death ten years later at the age of thirty-nine. An early history of the lawyers of Washington County describes him as “a good advocate ... a man whose ready wit made him remembered long after his asthma and appetite had wrought their work.” Milan H. Sessions, who practiced in Waitsfield from 1850 to 1855 and became the state’s attorney, earned the name “Long Sessions.” (History does not tell us why, though personal knowledge of a few attorneys might make it easy to speculate.) Hiram Carleton practiced in Waitsfield for about ten years until he became a judge of probate in 1883. He was known as a sound lawyer and safe counsel who mastered his cases, was careful in his pleadings, and never proclaimed himself certain of victory until final judgment was passed, reminding his friends, “Brag is a good dog, but Holdfast is better.”







It is clear that being a lawyer was a busy – though perhaps not lucrative – life. In 1812, the fixed fee of an attorney for drawing a writ and declaration of promissory note was seventeen cents, while the sheriff's fee for serving process by reading the writ was six cents. Civilization, in all its complexities, had indeed arrived in the Valley. And then, just like that, the rains came.

### **The flood of 1927**

There were always floods, the spring freshets that turned the roads to water and the towns to mush. In 1827, several days of rain caused what became known as the "Green Mountain Slide," when settlers on Fayston homesteads watched as trees, rocks, and debris thundered down the mountain for a mile or more, damming up one branch of Mill Brook and forming a "lake," then rushing downward to do more damage.

In 1830, a freshet raised the Mad River in the entire Valley, sweeping away every bridge in Waitsfield and taking the foundry where iron kettles were manufactured from ore brought from Orange County. A village teacher, staying with a family in Moretown, was trapped with the family on the top floor of the family's house. Toward morning, a cellar wall gave way, collapsing part of the building; hours later, the teacher and the family were floated to safety on a barn door. Others in town weren't as lucky; Henry Carpenter and his wife and son tried to escape the flood by walking along the water. The wife let go of her son's hand, and was swept away, found dead on the meadow below the next day.

In 1858, another flood came up so quickly that one farmer noted that at five o'clock there wasn't a foot of water in a nearby brook, and at ten o'clock he saw his barn carried away by the flood.

In some ways, the residents of the Valley had long since become inured to the flooding. One writer noted, "Mad River without this turbulence would be like the play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out." The flooding was hard on the farmers and particularly hard on the sawmill operators, since the mills were built directly on the water. A clapboard mill on





Shepherd's brook in Fayston went out in the 1858 flood, and was rebuilt. In the freshet of 1869, the rebuilt mill was carried off again. And, again, the owner rebuilt, this time a short distance downstream.

Yet no one had ever seen the likes of the flood of 1927, certainly not the mill operators up and down the rivers who lost everything; certainly not the farmers and shopkeepers who went to bed on November 3 after a lovely Indian summer day that seemed more like spring than fall; and certainly not Alton "Altee" Farr, who with his wife, Eunice, ran the Waitsfield and Fayston Telephone Company.



*Bridge Street, Waitsfield after 1927 Flood*

Vermont took the brunt of the two-day storm that drenched a region from central Connecticut to southern Quebec. When the rains finally ended – and a few days before the snow came – the flood had devastated the state and caused an estimated \$21 million in damage.

Roads, bridges, and railways were almost uniformly destroyed. What was striking was how fast and how far the waters rose, the rivers exceeding in many places any previous record.

People like those who lived along the Mad River and its tributaries, used to moving to high ground when the waters began to rise, had had no chance. Up and down the Valley, people were endangered and businesses were wiped out. Mills and shops in every town were simply gone. The gristmill in Warren, the sawmills and thousands of feet of lumber from Ward Lumber in Moretown, the Miles Store, the Bigelow





Creamery and all houses on one side of the road in Waitsfield gone, the earth on which they stood “washed away down to bare bed rock...and is now nothing but a part of the river channel,” reported Edward H. Jones, state commissioner of agriculture and a resident of Waitsfield.

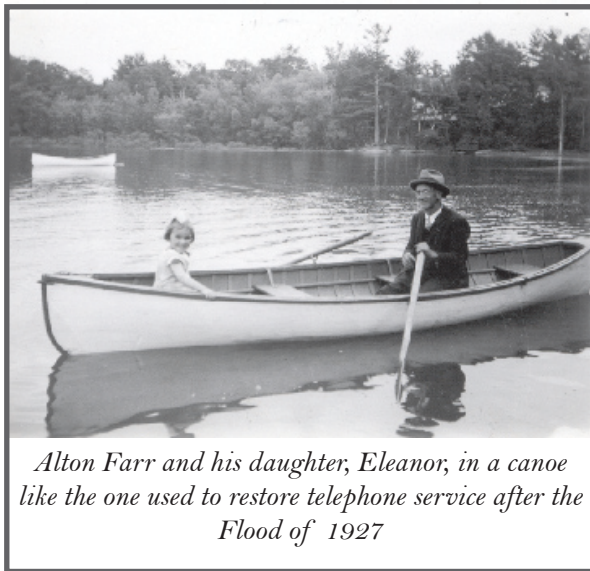
Gone. “I am a ruined man,” said Burton Ward, owner of the Moretown mills.

There were no means of communication either into or around Vermont; telephone lines and train tracks were destroyed, and the state had no way of reporting the mass destruction that had taken place or the state’s residents of letting friends and relatives know they were safe.

Farr, too, was facing ruin. His telephone lines, the source of all communication both in and out of the Valley, were all down. When the rains stopped Thursday night, he put a canoe into the water at Waitsfield and paddled along the Mad River for thirteen miles, stopping to repair the lines that linked his customers to the main line in Middlesex. In the end, Farr was declared a hero by the *Barre Times*, which called him the man who “repaired phones by canoe.”



*Alton Farr*

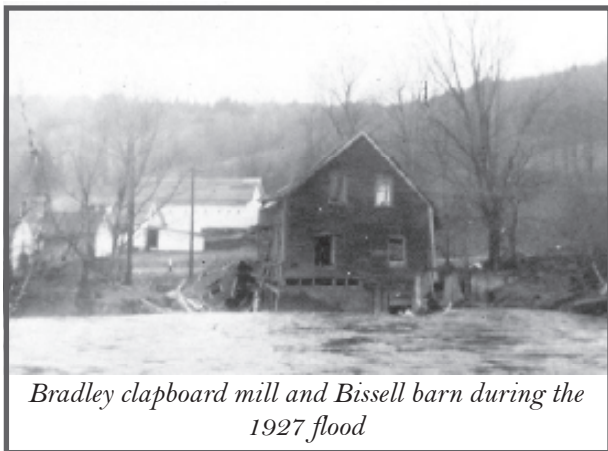


*Alton Farr and his daughter, Eleanor, in a canoe like the one used to restore telephone service after the Flood of 1927*



## Recovery

It took years to recover from the storm. The state legislature passed an \$8.5 million bond issue, and the federal government contributed another \$2.5 million, but only after the governor – reflecting Vermont's independent spirit – initially rejected



*Bradley clapboard mill and Bissell barn during the 1927 flood*

federal rehabilitation assistance. The trains started to run, and shopkeepers swept out the mud and started over again.

But some things could not be fixed. Although, in fact, Burton Ward was able to open his mill, few of the others that were swept away or severely damaged were rebuilt, and that industry became less and less important in the Valley. The Great Depression began in late 1929 and struck hard in Vermont. Tax bases in the Valley shrank in the 1930s and 1940s as business districts in Warren, Waitsfield, and Moretown retrenched. The population of Valley towns had already shrunk between 1900 and 1950, Fayston by almost a third.

The development of pre-packaged, mass-produced goods, mail order goods, and chain stores during the late 19th and early 20th centuries lessened the demand for locally produced goods, forcing many local merchants and artisans out of business. The automobile furthered this trend as it allowed customers to travel to urban shopping centers. By World War II, these combined factors depressed local commerce even more. By 1944 the number of cheese cooperatives was down a third from the late 1920s, and even the national trends were against the local dairy farmers: between 1910 and 1950, the amount of all dairy products consumed had dropped from 752 pounds per person to 740.





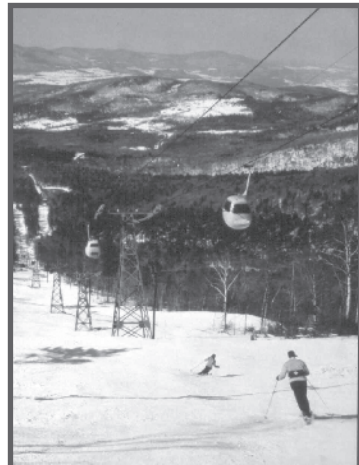
Just as it looked bleakest for the Valley, however, man's need to rush downhill on two tiny pieces of board took hold in Fayston.

Vermonters had never been too sure about skiing. Fun? Sure. But most felt it was a minor entertainment between the short growing seasons. In the early 1900s Norwegians living in the town of Stowe, near Mount Mansfield, began to revive the ancient sport of skiing by using it to navigate the otherwise impassable roads, drawing plenty of sneering comments from their neighbors.

Slowly skiing became more popular. Nordic jumps were created in Middlebury and St. Johnsbury where college teams practiced for competitions. Trails were cut on many mountains throughout the state, and the country's first ski race was held on Mount Mansfield in 1934, an exhausting hike to the summit, then a free-for-all down the hill. Finally, that year, someone in Vermont created the first tow-ski lift, a continuous rope powered by an antique Model-T Ford engine.

Almost immediately after this major event, rope tow areas sprouted across the state. One of those places was on the Austin farm in Warren, when the newly formed Warren Outing Club, led by prime organizer and local farmer David McNeill, set up a rope supplied by another town resident and took to the hills.

But until 1948, the Valley was on the sidelines in this rush to ski. That was the year that Roland Palmedo, a former Navy pilot and one of the original investors in the Stowe resort, flew over the forest covering Stark Mountain and decided it was perfect for a rough-and-tumble type of skiing that was far different from Stowe. He put up a single chair lift, invited Miss Vermont and Governor Ernest Gibson to take the first



*Early Sugarbush shot taken  
when the gondolas were in use*







*Mad River Glen*

ride, and opened Mad River Glen during a winter where there was no snow until February.

Although the impact was hardly electric – Henry Perkins, who opened Mad River Glen's first ski lodge, once joked that on a busy night his was the only place in town with fourteen empty beds – the ski industry vastly

changed the face of the Valley and the businesses that call it home. Today, Sugarbush Resort, founded on December 25, 1958, and dubbed “mascara mountain” because of the many models who skied there, and Mad River Glen continue to provide thrills – and income – to both the Valley and the visitors.

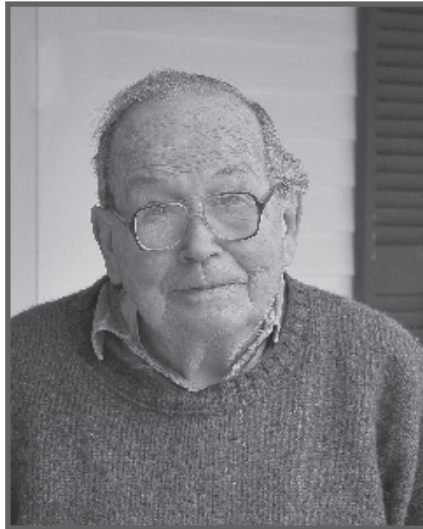
The march toward tourism was inevitable. Sleepy general stores like the Warren Store were converted to the tourist trade, innovative restaurants like Flatbread Pizza opened, and artists like Bill Heise moved to the Valley. The Pitcher Inn in Warren and the Waitsfield Inn and Round Barn Farm Inn in Waitsfield converted historic buildings to new and compelling uses. Land grew valuable, and the Valley became a second home destination for thousands. As one publication by the Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce described it in 1978, “The Mad River Valley region is turning a corner. And there seems to be gleaming white snow and light around that corner. It’s as if the Valley had been waiting for the magical combination of elements to converge. But there is a sense that they can afford to wait, too.”





**Thank you  
to all those who helped make this  
history possible:**

**Rebecca Peatman  
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Jack Smith  
John Williams  
Vermont Historical Society**



*Jack Smith*

**This story is dedicated to Jack Smith for his incredible dedication to the Mad River Valley, his love of history and his wonderful friendship throughout the years. The Valley is a much richer place because of Jack's contributions.**

