

Chatham In 1916

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

A person walking down Chatham's Main Street in the first decade of the 20th century would have found a quiet dirt road with an occasional horse and buggy or delivery wagon passing by, and not until about 1914 would he see an automobile belonging to a year-round resident, although summer people had the new invention in town as early as 1912.

Education and entertainment was provided by the Eldredge Public Library, which first opened in 1896. At that time the library patrons would select their reading from a supply of 4,000 books, while today the number is over 50,000. But the opportunity for entertainment was vastly increased in 1910 when Charles Lake, proprietor of Lake's Variety Store at the corner of Main Street and the western branch of Sea View Street, set up a projection booth in the balcony of the town hall for showing films. The latest films, such as "The Perils of Pauline," held the members of the audience both intrigued by the new invention and on the edge of their seats as Pauline's perils were shown on the screen.

At the time there were 598 dwellings in Chatham, none of which had running water or electricity. Light was provided by kerosene lamps, hot water came from the kettle on the kitchen stove that was heated by wood or coal, and water came from the hand pump on top of the well outside, but in more up-to-date houses by a pump at the kitchen sink. Most people had a small vegetable garden to provide their own food and a flock of chickens for both eggs and meat. In addition, most families had at least one cow and one horse. In the pantry or in the cellar they had a barrel of apples and a large crock of salt pork, which most likely had come from one of their own pigs.

Before the Second World War very few families had an automobile, making it essential to have home deliveries from the ice man, the milk man and the grocery store. The two grocery stores, Atwood's and Bearnse's, both delivered, and they continued that service throughout the War when gasoline was strictly rationed.

Even though most families had a horse and possibly a wagon to go with it, individuals traveled around town mainly on foot. All young people walked to and from school, except for those from South and West Chatham who came by train to the central intermediate and high school that had been built in 1858. Sometimes, as Joshua Nickerson relates, they could hitch a ride on a passing and accommodating delivery wagon. Every neighborhood had its own primary school of the same size and design as those still standing, the Atwood School on the corner of Cedar and Main streets and the Village School on School Street in the Old Village, although the South Chatham School, which still stands and is an ice cream store, was of a different design. For heat these schools had one pot-bellied stove, usually in the northwest corner, and for water they had a pump on the well outside, which in the winter had to be thawed before each use. A privy behind the school provided the toilet facilities.

On Main Street, which was first paved with stones in 1900, the Orpheum Theatre was at the west end, and next to it was the Universalist Church (now St. Christopher's Episcopal Church). Most of the other buildings were still residences, but gradually they became stores on the ground level. Among those was Mark Howard's tailor shop in what is now the Mayflower Shop. One form of entertainment that was not allowed—or at least not legally—was the drinking of any alcoholic beverages, as the sale of intoxicating beverages had been voted down at town meeting in 1882, but a ready supply was available from the rum runners who landed their wares at the

more obscure landing places along the shore. At that time people living by the shore of Stage Harbor often would see cars at the top of the hill flashing their headlights and receiving an answering signal from a boat just off shore. In 1885, however, it was voted at town meeting to allow druggists to sell alcohol for “medicinal, mechanical, and chemical purposes.”

Visitors could find comfortable accommodations at the various boarding houses and inns in Chatham at that time, including the Traveler’s Home (now the Chatham Inn at 359 Main, formerly the Cranberry Inn), The Mattquasson Inn, The Wayside Inn, Eldredge’s Boarding House, the Hawes House, the recently opened Chatham Bars Inn, and in North Chatham Hattie Baxter’s Boarding House. Most socializing was done at the inns or in private homes, as clubs such as the Beach and Tennis Club and Eastward Ho! Country Club did not begin operations until the 1920s. It was possible, however, to enjoy free time at the one billiard room and either of the two pool rooms.

Although several of the beaches were private, it was possible for the public to enjoy swimming on Lighthouse Beach, on Harding’s Beach, and at many of the fresh water ponds with public access. Understandably boating was a favorite pastime for those who were fortunate enough to own a vessel. Anyone who wished to swim in the warm water of the Mill Pond could use the accommodations provided by the bath house at the east end. And for those who enjoyed hunting and fishing, Monomoy was a paradise of unspoiled dunes and beaches, full of unsuspecting birds and waiting fish.

Compared to the hustle and bustle of today, the town was quiet and peaceful, but no visitor could ever be at a loss for pleasurable activities or simple relaxation in what must have seemed the ideal vacation spot to the many visitors arriving by train. The more adventurous could drive their newly acquired automobiles, provided they were supplied with several spare tires, as blow-outs were frequent. But with perseverance and determination they ultimately would reach their destination where the pleasures of a summer by the sea awaited them.

