

THE BEST OF TIMES

BY HUBBARD J. COBB

The author recalls growing up in Weston and Westport in the 1920's – years when being a kid was the cat's pajamas

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“**I**n 1912 my father, Frank I. Cobb, editor of Joseph Pulitzer's New York World, bought a farm in Weston. He wanted a retreat from city tensions and a summer home for himself and his soon-to-be-bride, Margaret Hubbard Ayer. He and my mother were married in 1913 and began to visit the farm regularly. My sister Jane was born a year later and I joined the family in 1917.

Three years after buying the farm, my father decided it would be nice to have the pond across the road for swimming and fishing. The pond – actually the dammed-up west branch of the Saugatuck River – was the source of power for the nearby lumber – and gristmill. Whenever the mill was not running, water would accumulate in the pond, then cascade over the dam in a rushing waterfall – just as it does today.

In order to acquire the pond, my father had to buy the mill, a large tract of land and several other structures, including the house where the mill hands lived and an ice house. The whole complex became known as “Cobb's Mill.”

My father soon discovered that raising pigs and cows, grinding grain and making shingles out of chestnut (already beginning to die from the chestnut blight) was a fast way to go broke. So he sold off most of the livestock and closed down the mill, but kept the property.

In those early days, coming out from the city was an all-day event. Our family took the train from Grand Central. (Getting to the station with all our luggage was itself a time-consuming process). Outside

Stamford, engines would be switched from electric to steam and we would chug along to South Norwalk, where we would be met by Dan Purcell. Dan ran a taxi and livery service from Westport, but would drive us to Weston via the Newtown Turnpike – a better road than the one from Westport. Still, it took two hours to get there. Sometimes Dan would drive into New York City to fetch us – a long, tedious drive back on the Boston Post Road but sometimes more convenient for us than the train – especially after my father's health began to deteriorate. Dan charged \$25 for this special service.

Once we arrived at the farm, we would exchange the modern conveniences we had in the city for kerosene lamps and a wood stove. Our indoor plumbing was primitive and would only function if the big one-cylinder gasoline engine that powered the water pump would start. Often it would not, and like most of our neighbors, we would have to get along with the hand pump by the kitchen sink, chamber pots and an outhouse.

One thing we did have was plenty of ice – each winter, neighbors pitched in and cut big blocks of ice from the pond. These were packed in sawdust and stacked ceiling-high in our big ice house. So keeping food fresh was no problem. Neither was making ice cream or a cool lemonade on a hot summer day. There was enough ice to keep our family and all our neighbors supplied.

Weston was completely rural at that time; it had no paved roads and was sparsely populated. In 1920, the population was only 703. There

were no stores, and the closest thing to a town center was Norfield Church. In back of the church was Norfield School, the Weston Grange and a carriage barn.

Westport, on the other hand, did have a center and a number of stores, but because Weston roads were so bad (Route 57 was not paved to Westport until around 1922), it was practically a day's trip to get there and back. So we didn't go to Westport too often.

The best way to get around Weston was either by buggy, horse-and-wagon or by foot. Our postman, Mr. Keene, covered his RFD route by horse-and-buggy until 1922 or so, when he traded his rig in for a Model T.

Most everyone we knew in Weston in those days had a big vegetable garden, fruit trees, chickens, and a cow for milk and butter. If something was needed that could not be raised or made locally, “The Wagon Man” would soon be around with his traveling general store. From our own doorstep we could buy tea, coffee, sugar, packaged foodstuffs, hardware, sewing materials, kerosene and other provisions.

Once a year, Mr. Nathan, the upholsterer, would come around. He could repair and reupholster furniture, make slipcovers and draperies, and do odd jobs. If you had a lot of work for him, he would stay overnight. Jane and I looked forward to Mr. Nathan's visits because he was an expert at eating peas with his knife.

Weston in summer was a child's paradise. My sister and I and our friends had

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