

### **Welcome to the John Woodruff Simpson Memorial Library.**

As we celebrate Craftsbury bicentennial year, it is appropriate to consider the historical significance of this library, formerly a general store, in the life of the community. We are fortunate to have the following account written by Miss Mary Jean Simpson, whose grandfather James and father George Simpson operated this building as a store, and whose cousin Miss Jean Simpson later founded the library in memory of her father. Miss Mary's delightful and informative narrative is reprinted here with thanks to Mr. John West who is in possession the original copy.

It was a Saturday evening near the close of the Civil War and the single straggling street of the little village of East Craftsbury was deserted. Not a sound could be heard except the roar of the Whetstone Brook plunging over the mill-dam and the distant rumble of a lumber wagon on the north road. The street was empty save for a row of horses tied to the long hitching pole in front of a small frame building half-way down the street, above the door of which was a weather-beaten sign indicating that this was the General Store and Post Office. Suddenly a small black-haired boy darted out the shadows of the house next door, ran across the intervening strip of orchard, rolled under the fence, and worming his way between the horses, crept up to the lighted window of the store, and raising himself on his toes, peered in. His grey eyes snapped with excitement as he eagerly scanned the room, which was full of people. His father, the proprietor, stood behind the red counter weighing out brown sugar into a wooden bucket. The little hunch-backed clerk was just disappearing into the counting-room. John, his older brother, a much privileged character, now home on a vacation from school in the neighboring county, was surveying the scene from the top of a huge cracker barrel. Around the stove and along the counters were several groups of men and women busy with purchases or deep in discussion. The boy, satisfied that the moment was an auspicious one, dropped from the window, and moved across to the door. Softly lifting the heavy iron latch, he slowly pushed the door open and quietly slipped inside; there as quietly settle down on a low stool near the door, partly concealed from view by the molasses barrel, from which point of vantage his eyes wandered over a familiar scene which never failed to interest and thrill him.

The store consisted of one big, low room with smoke-blackened walls and ceiling, from which opened two smaller rooms. In the middle of the large room stood an immense box stove in which a fire crackled, for even in April the chill of winter lingered in this northern village. Along the right side of the room ran a long wooden counter. Behind it the walls were lined with shelves containing all kinds of merchandise and in front of it a row of nail kegs, flanked at one end by the cracker barrel and at the other by a large hogshead, did duty as seats for those not yet eligible to enjoy the comfort of the straight chairs near the

stove. At the front of the counter and directly above the small boy's head, was the Post Office, which consisted of a sort of wooden cupboard divided into many small compartments for mail, with a square opening in the middle through which the clerk would pass out the letters and papers upon the arrival of the daily stage from Barton which would soon be due.

In the rear was another red counter with deep shelves and drawers behind it, and on the left a long table, also red, piled high with clothing, blankets and huge bolts of cloth. A pile of salt codfish, a wooden firkin of mackerel and a box of smoked herring filled the air with their acrid odors. Barrels of coffee beans, buckwheat flour, salt, and West India brown sugar, stood against the wall and the shelves above bore the mysterious sign: "W. I. Goods and Groceries." There were ranged rows of round wooden boxes containing pepper, ginger and snuff. Underneath were small drawers bearing illegible signs but containing such ordinary commodities as shot, salt petre, tobacco, soda, lamp wicks, stove-blackening and dozens of other articles of like character. Hand-made wooden buckets containing maple sugar and strong yellow butter were piled on the counter beside a basket of eggs and a large round cheese. At the left and rear bales of newly sheared wool, ready to be sent to Boston by the next freight team gave off a thick, greasy smell and a pile of wooden butter tubs rose unsteadily toward the ceiling.

From hooks on the walls and ceiling hung a motley collection of articles---cowhide whips, wooden rakes, leather harnesses, axe helms, sperm oil lanterns, a saw, a whiffle-tree, a pair of copper-toed boots and a brass kettle, gleaming against the dark background of the drygoods shelves where were displayed dress materials of worsted, calico and silk; also bolts of denim, ticking, unbleached cotton cloth and heavy homespun woolens. In two glass showcases at the end of the table were displayed all sorts of milliners' and dressmakers' supplies, alongside of several very stylish bonnets and a fine red wool shawl, bought by Mr. Simpson on his last trip to Boston, and already much desired by every young lady in the village.

Under the opposite counter were straw covered bales marked with strange characters and containing bright green tea: also boxes of twisted tobacco and a bucket of hard glue, shiny and evil-smelling. High on the shelves above were piles of white plates, cups and pitchers, stone crocks and queerly shaped pots and jars, side by side with wooden chopping bowls and tin buckets.

At the counters the people of the village were busy exchanging eggs and butter for sugar, snuff and the hundred and one other articles sold by the country storekeeper in those days when telephones, mail-order houses and automobiles had never been thought of and when barter was still the generally accepted form of trade.

From his stool behind the molasses barrel the little boy sniffed in the delicious smells of cheese, salt fish, coffee and leather with which the store was redolent. How he loved it all! When he was a man he would be a merchant like his father and wear black whiskers and a high white stock and go to Boston to buy goods and drive about the country behind a fine horse like "Jeanie Deans" taking in maple sugar and butter and sitting up at night as late as he liked---but here his reverie was interrupted by the arrival of the stage, a huge wagon drawn by two white horses which drew up at the door with a great flourish. The driver's "Hallo" brought the hunch-backed clerk hurrying from the counting-room to receive the mail bags which were emptied on the counter behind the Post Office and their contents quickly sorted for distribution. The group of men around the stove broke up and everyone pressed toward the little square window through which letters and papers were thrust out to their respective owners. A hush fell over the room as those fortunate enough to receive anything turned eagerly to its perusal and the mail bags were closed up and taken out to be carried on to the next village. Then followed the part of the evening's program to which the small boy had been impatiently looking forward for an hour. An old man near the stove spoke. "Ye'll be readin' us the war news, wun't ye, Jim?" he queried.

Less than a month before the attempt to end the war by diplomacy had failed and the great Army of the Potomac had renewed its operations against Richmond. Many of the families of the village had sons or husbands in the Union army and each day's news was awaited with anxiety. It had become the custom for Mr. Simpson, who had a New York paper, to read aloud the account of the army's doings and to lead in the discussions which invariably followed, so now he came from behind the counter, unfolding the Tri-weekly Tribune, from which he began to read. "The Stronghold of Petersburg Falls Before the Attack of Union Troops." A cheer greeted this news and old Irish blacksmith, who had four sons in Grant's army, slapped his knee and shouted: "Bedad, en' I hopes me byes were in the thick of it." The reading went on until the entrance of a new customer led Mr. Simpson to pass the paper over to Elder H. whose thin little voice took up the tale, but when he announced that "General Hill was shot from his horse but his brave CORPSE rallied and charged the enemy," he was greeted with such shouts of laughter that he refused to read longer so the group gradually broke up and each with a cheery "Good-night, Jim" went out into the cold spring starlight. Then the heavy wooden shutters were slammed shut and fastened, the lights were blown out and Mr. Simpson was just fitting the old brass key into the lock when John exclaimed, "Why, Father, here's George," for there, in the dark corner, half slipped from the stool, his head resting against the sticky sides of the molasses barrel, was the little black-haired lad, fast asleep and dreaming of marching men and charging battalions.

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Three decades later the same little village nestled at the foot of Cate's Hill just as it had in the days when Lee's surrender had sent the countryside into wild rejoicing. The old, Covenanter church, as firm and square as the faith of its founders, and the little white school house, unchanged for forty years, still guarded the entrance to the village. The straight, white road led past the same houses except where a grass-grown cellar told the story of a fire or where a veranda and a bay window gave evidence that at least some of the inhabitants were abreast of the times. The same huge wood-piles flanked the front yards and the same straggly gardens with lilacs and snowball bushes in the corners fronted on the dusty street. But the industries of the village had waned. The hulling-mill no longer roared and rumbled in the hollow. The wagon shop and the cooper shop were long since gone and the mill-pond below the old store was dry save for a tiny brook which meandered across its weedy bed. The hitching pole by the store had fewer horses tied there on a Saturday night and not so many people came to the old church on Sunday. But the store itself was much the same. To be sure there had been some improvements, such as the addition of a store room and a porch, to say nothing of bigger panes in the windows and a huge iron safe in one corner, but the smells were the same. The group around the stove and on the porch discussed politics and local gossip just as their fathers had done before them as they waited for the mail which now, with the building of the new railroad, came daily from Greensboro. The little boy of long ago had realized his dream and was the proprietor and postmaster as his father used to be, with children of his own to whom the store was a place of never failing charm.

Now, instead of copper-toed boots hung from the ceiling, there were neat boxes of shoes, rubbers and evenkid slippers, to be found on the shelves. A new counter with deep drawers behind it had taken the place of the old read table and patent medicines, for which there was a steady demand, filled the shelves once occupied by the "W. I. Goods and Groceries." A bunch of shiny black whips hung where the brass kettle once was and rows of colored glass ornaments, china, and brick-a-brac, left over from the Christmas goods array, filled the show cases.

On this certain summer day a most exciting thing had happened. A strange man had driven up to the store and produced from under the seat of his buggy a box, which he brought inside and opened to reveal a strange machine with many brass screws, rubber disks and long tubes with black things on the ends. A thin little girl with long braids who was busy with a piece of ribbon candy in the shelter of the counter, peeked out to see what was going on and was amazed to see her father with two of the long tubes in his ears. The strange man turned a button and faintly she heard the sound of distant music. Slowly she emerged from behind the counter. "Come, Mollie, hear this," her father said to her

and still hesitating, but consumed with a mighty curiosity, she was induced to put the tubes in her ears and heard a squeaky negro voice singing, "Ise Gwine Back to Dixie." Thus the first talking machine came to East Hill.

How well the same little girl can remember going eagerly to the store every night hoping that the mail would bring her the copy of "Robinson Crusoe" which she had laboriously earned as a premium for selling bluing. It was to be her own book and she could imagine its leather covers and colored pictures every time she shut her eyes. Imagine her disappointment when the book finally came and she found out that it had not a single picture in it; no Crusoe on the sands, no black Friday, only a very cheap, paper-covered, poorly printed copy of the great classic, which she hid far back under the old counter, where she found it years later, musty and mouse-eaten. But in one of the show cases in the old store, there was displayed one Christmas, a red cloth-bound set of Washington Irving's works, together with a much decorated gift copy of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and a beautiful blue and gold volume of Scott's "Lady of the Lake." The little girl, older now, but still book-hungry, hung over that showcase, hoping against hope that she might have one of those books for Christmas, and what a thrill she had when, on the Christmas tree, she found "The Lady of the Lake." To this day that book is a treasured possession.

The store, in those days, did what the movies do for the children of today. It was the means of bringing romance, vision and adventure. The drummers who were almost daily visitors told the little girl wonderful tales of the world which lay beyond the hill. They often gave her pictures and books and once a pair of kid shoes. The best one of all was the kindly, big-hearted man who sold Montpelier crackers, candy and cigars. He drove a white horse hitched to a big green wagon; he told wonderful stories, was a most liberal dispenser of sweets, and once in a while, he would give a good little girl a ride on the high seat of the green wagon.

Then there was the old stage driver who had long whiskers and always said, "G-ap, G-ap," to his horses. For years the children debated what those words meant. Sometimes the little Scotchman who made barrels came to the store and he always made straight for the herring box from which he extracted the largest and blackest fish, and then, with a cracker and a piece of cheese, he would retire to a little, short-legged chair by the door, and in dignified silence, broken only by a sigh of gastronomic satisfaction, would eat his strange lunch. He seemed to have such a good time that the little girl once tried a herring too, but the result was disappointing.

But times were slowly changing. Not so many people came now to

trade at the old store. They sent their butter to creameries and their maple syrup and eggs to wholesale commission houses, while the Rural Free Delivery and the mail order houses brought the merchandise which they needed direct to their doors. The large towns had made successful bids for country trade and gradually, little by little, the country merchant's business dwindled until the old days, of a \$20,000 turnover became only a memory. So it was that with the death of its owner, the old store, which had been the social and business center of the community for almost a century, closed its doors, and the little village entered upon a new era of its existence.

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Another three decades and again the scene is the little hill-top village. But how many changes. The corner where the white church stood is empty and farther down the street is the modern building which has replaced it. The little white school house has a neat entrance porch, big windows and other improvements and bears the sign: "Standard School." The old blacksmith shop has burned down and a new one has taken its place. The wood-piles have vanished from the front yards. The village road is no longer dusty and the untidy gardens have been replaced with neat stretches of lawn and clumps of shrubbery. Electric light wires and radio aerials glisten in the sun. The old barns have been torn down and a set of handsome farm buildings fill the hollow by the brook, but the old store is still there. It is changed to be sure. Instead of the uneven cobble stones in front and the stone post to which the horses once were tied there is now an expanse of green lawn divided by a gravel path which leads up to the porch from which the rickety chairs of the village loungers have long since vanished. Green porch boxes full of scarlet geraniums occupy the space once reserved for the small boys. Only the big door and the old wooden shutters are the same. Tonight both stand open and the light streams out across the lawn. A crowd of laughing children come up the hill from the Post Office. They make a rush along the gravel path and onto the porch. A welcoming voice from inside invites them to come in. The little girl of long ago follows them over the uneven threshold. She sees the same old room as that of her childhood, but the salt fish and the acrid smells are gone. The shelves, instead of holding merchandise, are filled with books. The green walls reflect the light from parchment-shaded electric lamps. The old, sagging floor has been replaced by one of hardwood which is covered with rugs. The windows are hung with a gay chintz. Two of the old red counters have disappeared. The third one remains but on it, instead of dry-goods, are glass cases full of curios brought from the far ends of the earth. The drawers behind the counter contain unmounted pictures, hundreds of postal cards and sets of illustrated magazines. The shelves above are full of books of travel, philosophy and religion. The space formerly devoted to coffee and tea is now piled

with children's story books and a small boy lies flat on the floor with one of them spread out before him. On the patent medicine shelves are volumes of biography and in the corner once used as the office is a radio. Through the open door of the old clothing room can be seen a long green table covered with papers and magazines. On the walls are bird charts and pictures. In the corner is a bookcase and underneath the window a cushioned seat. At the table several people are reading and one high school boy is busy getting material for his weekly theme.

Out in the main room someone is playing the Largo from the New World Symphony, while the older people sit around in easy chairs to listen. The children who have just come in have already joined a game around the small table in the rear of the room. The librarian, who is also the Good Fairy of the neighborhood, is busy giving out books with a minimum of red tape and a maximum of service. It is a nice place to be, this cozy library, and tonight there is a special attraction for the children because there are to be "picture" which will begin in a few minutes. As soon as the signal is given the children troop upstairs to what was once the old grain room where still a big wooden wheel and pulley hang against the wall and a faint musty odor of cornmeal lingers. Across one end of the room is a white screen and in front are low benches for the children. They crowd into their seats and the evening's entertainment begins. First there is thrown on the screen a series of pictures for the older children, showing the American Indians and scenes from the history of the Far West. Then comes the real treat of the evening. The reflectoscope throws on the sheet a most remarkable picture of Benny Bunny sitting in an arm chair with his feet in a tub of hot water. The children scream with delight. Then follows the whole series, drawn and colored by the young lady who is showing them. As she slips the cards into the machine she tells a delightful story for each one. The audience is entranced. The children burst into laughter. They hold their breaths in suspense. They shout with glee. All too soon it is over and they file downstairs again where each child chooses a book and is out of the door. "Goodnight, Miss Jean. Thank you," they call as they go.

Meanwhile the other visitors are listening to a radio concert in the main room while the Village School Improvement Committee is holding a meeting in the reading room. An old gentleman comes in to consult "The Pictorial History of the Civil War." He is one of the very group which listened to the news of the fall of Petersburg. Chautauqua tickets are on sale at the desk. A notice for a rehearsal of "The Merchant of Venice" at the library on Tuesday and a poster for a church social are pinned to the bulletin board. The little girl of long ago shuts her eyes and tries to conjure up the picture of the old store of her childhood. She can almost smell the codfish and kerosene again. The murmur of voices is the same; the rattle of the old latch as someone

goes out is a sound out of the past. It is still the old store. The difference is that now instead of food and clothing, it is dispensing ideas and ideals.

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Author's (Miss Mary Jean Simpson) note:

The old store referred to in the accompanying article was built by a man named Osgood in the early 1830s and came into the possession of my grandfather, James W. Simpson, about 1847. He conducted a general store there until his death in 1886 when it became the property of my father who carried on a store there until his death in 1914. For a time thereafter the building was rented and finally closed. After the death of my father's oldest brother, John W. Simpson, of New York City, the building was purchased by his daughter, Miss Jean Simpson, who has made it the library described above. It is called the John Woodruff Simpson Memorial Library and contains over a thousand volumes to which additions are constantly being made. It is designed to be a community library of the greatest possible service to the people in every way and that it is accomplishing this purpose is evident by the size and scope of its circulation and the variety of enterprise with which it is connected. Miss Simpson has endowed the library and provides a librarian when she does not herself assume the duties of that position. The library has become the most valued and valuable asset which we have, save only the church itself, and its usefulness is constantly growing.