

THE SOUTH END OF 1900

By Marie Coady

As the clock ticks toward a new millennium, the authentic voices of the 20th century begin to fade into history. Soon the only resources left us to experience those decades will be volumes of dusty and sometimes dull history tomes, inanimate photos, selected films, and taped recordings of occasions deemed worthy of note by the keepers of the archives.

I have no doubt there will be volumes of information readily available to the public about wars, presidents, assassinations, disasters, and other national and world shattering events that left an indelible impression on history. But who will capture and store the flavor, the sights, the sounds, and the smells of a century of everyday life in a community like Woburn when all those who experienced it are gone?

Life in Woburn at the beginning of the 20th century was very different from the Woburn of today with its paved roads, clean air, running water, and indoor bathroom facilities. Areas of Woburn that were once farmland have been transformed into suburban neighborhoods and our population has swelled from 12,000 in the late 1880s to more than 35, 000 today and growing. Even the old neighborhoods, especially the South End, have evolved into more residential neighborhoods, a stark contrast to the industrial centers they were in the early 1900s. That was a time when tanneries dominated the landscape, and the houses that lined the streets, within feet of those tanneries, belonged to tannery owners and were less than luxurious.

According to the memoirs of the late Dr. Thomas J. Glennon, entitled “Early Life”, the South End of Woburn was a world apart. A world so different from the experiences of other children growing up only a few miles away it seemed another planet.

Glennon describes his house in the South End around 1900 as “. . . a tannery house, a wooden structure of two tenements . . the rear wall of which stood no more than 20 feet from the liquor pits housed in a low flat-roofed building, dim windowed and bleak. A high fence afforded the only barrier between kitchen and the refuse from the vats, which was dumped in the intervening space. The result was a large pool of brown liquor, soft and slimy at first, but soon becoming solid . . .with winter’s low temperatures and forming the neighborhood’s dirty ice rink.”

What Glennon remembers most is dirt. Dirt roads and yards turned to a muddy quagmire after a downpour. He remembers that mud oozing through his toes on warm days because most children in his neighborhood had no shoes in summer. He also remembers the bucket of water that always stood at the back door where he’d wash the mud off before entering the kitchen, and in winter

months getting a taste of the strap for not removing his muddy shoes before tramping across his mother's just washed kitchen floor.

The bare wooden frame house where Glennon lived on John Street had few of life's amenities. "The kitchen furnishings," he explains, "were minimal in number and efficiency - a black coal stove, a shallow iron sink with one cold water faucet, a bare table with few wooden chairs, a rough board floor and a kerosene bracket lamp set in a frame on the wall."

Glennon remembers his mother "blackening" the kitchen stove faithfully once a week with stove black, an oily substance that made the stove shine an ebony color that passed for clean, yet did remove the soot accumulated from a week of burning the soft coal that produced so much soot it seemed to be everywhere. The floor she guarded so diligently against the onslaught of muddy shoes, was swept daily and scrubbed once a week with a scrubbing brush as she went down on all fours dragging a pail of water alongside her. But that bare wooden floor took its toll on his mothers' knees, and Glennon describes them as "splinter-laden".

Upstairs were two bare bedrooms with iron beds and an old fashioned commode in the corner of each room so you wouldn't have to stumble to the outhouse in the dark of night. No heat and no rugs meant your feet were greeted every morning by cold, bare floors that were guaranteed to wake you with a start. Since the only source of heat in the house was that old iron stove in the kitchen he remembers that during a cold snap, bedroom windows were covered with ice for days at a time.

There were even periods when that kitchen stove would be stone cold for lack of that sooty, soft coal. Those were what tannery workers called the "slack periods". During those periods, there was no money for coal and young Glennon helped out by "coke picking" through a pile of cinders at the gas works nearby.

At age eight Glennon discovered that if he rose before 6 a.m. and made his way to the pile of discarded cinders, he could pick through the waste and find pieces big enough to support a flame, and he was not alone on those cold mornings. Other children younger than he were regulars at the gas works. Glennon also found he could pick nearly a bushel of coal before school. He would continue this chore throughout the summer months so he could lay in an ample supply of coal to boil the water for the tea they drank three times a day and bake the large loaves of bread that made up their diet. Milk and sugar was considered a luxury, but the hot tea warmed them through the winter months and the bread, as simple as it was, filled hungry bellies.

The tanneries played a large part in everyone's life. It was the father's place of employment, the bane of the mothers' existence as she fought the soot that settled on her newly washed clothes, but it also provided an interesting place for children of the South End to wile away the hours exploring the nine

tanneries that lined the railroad tracks between Green and Cross Streets. There were also freight cars where impish young boys could elude the cop on the beat, and the gas works and iron foundry offered perfect places for curious young boys to explore as well.

"Along the spur tracks between freight cars and buildings there was a narrow space, out of sight of passersby and far enough removed from houses to allow exaggerated and loud common talk to those who drink more than is necessary for mild stimulation." To Glennon that meant there were lots of bottles to collect and sell to the local liquor dealer and make a tidy profit. But sometimes he said, "It hurt to find the bottles smashed on the rail or against the cars". He saw that as wasteful and denying his family some revenue.

One tannery house Glennon lived in belonged to the Murdock Tannery and his kitchen window was "no more than twenty feet from the dankest and most odiferous of all the ramifications of a sprawling tannery, the liquor pit building", and he describes that building perfectly in the next paragraph.

"Beyond the liquor pits loomed the five-storied red shop, or tannery with its steeply pitched roof and two small smokestacks. These last belched forth constantly huge volumes of black smoke, the waste from soft burning coal. Soot spread over the neighborhood, befouling the clothes, newly washed and strung on a line, which stretched from the fence to a hook near the kitchen door. In open fields nearby, newly tanned half hides, brown and wet, were draped on racks for drying, exuding the characteristic, obnoxious tannery odor."

But beyond the odiferous odor of tanneries, Glennon also remembers the corner store and its smell of sour pickles, crackers, bread and kerosene. He would watch in amazement as the "store lady", the widow Annie Ahern, herself the mother of two boys and two girls, disappeared behind a "maze of boxes and barrels" to return with a "bag of flour, rolls of fly paper and even a broom or washboard". His ambition as a young boy was to work at the candy counter in Widow Ahern's store. He could think of no better profession than to oversee the broad flat cases that held the trays of candy that sold for 3 or 4 pieces for a penny.

He also remembers the smell and sights of the corner meat market, the faces of friends and the sights and sounds of the pushcart men shouting out for junk, bottles, rags and bones, the stuff of their livelihood. He remembers the sound of an occasional automobile that would invade the neighborhood causing everyone to stare at the strange sight as well as the buggies and wagons that were more frequent vehicles along the unpaved streets of the South End. On dry, dusty days they'd work up a mean cloud of dust and in wet weather would spray mud on your clothes as they passed by.

Dr. Thomas J. Glennon has left a treasury of memories in his 38 page documented history of his “Early Life”, but his greatest contribution is that through his vibrant words he has been able to recapture the smells of every facet of his neighborhood, the feel of the cold as his feet hit the floor each winter morning, or the warm mud oozing through his toes in summer. He also captures the sight of a sky filled with soot raining down on a neighborhood that no longer remembers what it used to be.

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