

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

I was born on November 22, 1909 in the little red Cape Cod cottage on Mill Way at the junction of what was once a private way which became Freezer Road after the cold storage plant was built in Barnstable Village. Except for living the last few years on Freezer Road, I have lived all my life on Mill Way, in the house where I was born and also in the house where my brother John was born, at the corner of Main Street and Mill Way. In fairly recent years it has bothered me considerably and, as my two daughters would say, "Drives my father up the wall", to see in print, especially in legal notices, present day deeds and other instruments, (the authors of which should know better), the words, Millway Road, Millway Street and Millway Lane. Be it known that Mill Way was the Way to the Mill, Blish's tide water grist mill which was at the Mill Pond, south east of the Common Fields Bridge. This mill was established by Abraham Blish in 1658 and, from information gathered by my grandfather, Alfred Loring Crocker Sr., in 1918, descendants of Abraham Blish were the owners and operators of the Blish Milling Company of Seymour, Indiana, millers of spring and winter wheat at that time. I quote in part from a mill trade paper named, "The Dixie Miller" published in Nashville, Tennessee in December, 1910.

"Emblazoned in gold letters on the great vault door in the office of the Blish Milling Company of Seymour, Indiana are the following inscriptions: Abraham Blish, Barnstable, Mass, 1658; James Shields, 1816; Shields & Ewing, 1851-1855; Shields and Blish, 1855-1858; James Shields, 1816; John H Blish, 1858-1868 ;J.H. Blish and Co, 1878-1883; Needy Shields Blish and Co, 1883-1885; Blish Milling Company, 1886-1910. This represents nine generations of millers. Two hundred and sixty years ago when we were the Colonies, an unimportant dependency of Great Britain, Abraham Blish established a tide mill at Barnstable Massachusetts. It would be difficult to imagine the character of the machinery in this old mill, the remains of which are still standing (in 1910) but our mind's eye easily pictures the grim Pilgrim fathers' armed with antiquated blunderbusses and every sense alert for sign of hostile Indians, going to this mill with their grist."

An official of the Blish Milling Company wrote to my grandfather in 1918 stating that the company for many years featured the fact of the early establishment of Blish's Mill in Barnstable in 1658 in its advertising. The large watermark in their stationary is a depiction of the old tide mill complete with mill wheel and the words, "The First Blish Mill, Barnstable, Mass. 1658. I have one of their cloth bags which held 96 lbs of Colonial Flour and also a small paper bag which held 12 lbs of, both with depictions in color of "Blish's Colonial Mill, A.D. 1658 Barnstable, Mass, Millers since Colonial days." It is interesting to note in Amos Otis'; Genealogical Notes of Barnstable Families; *"Blush – Abraham Blush-This name is uniformly written in the Colonial and early Barnstable records as "Blush". Many of his descendents now spell their name Blish, though the popular pronunciation of the name continues to be Blush. He was of Barnstable in 1641 and was probably one of the first settlers. On July 17, 1658 he bought twenty two acres in the Old Common Field, and sixteen acres, (his house lot), on the south of the Mill Pond. His dwelling house stood a short distance south-easterly from the present water mill. The causeway which forms the Mill Dam was called in early times Blush's Bridge, and the point of land at the western extremity of the Old Common Field is now known as Blush's Point."*

I have several photographs of Blish's Mill, the most recent of which is dated 1900 but it was not there in my memory. However when I was a boy, I remember seeing a huge mill stone on the edge of the bank of the Mill Pond near where the mill building had stood. Indeed, the boys of the village, myself included,

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

used to place our clothes on this stone when we went “skinny dipping” in the Mill Pond, as did my father, my great uncle Loring Crocker and other village elders. Uncle Loring never failed to call it, “a great privilege”. There was hardly an automobile that went down Mill Way in those days. There were no structures of any kind where the Mill Way Marine Service, Mattakeese Wharf Restaurant, Barnstable Harbor Fish Market and the two large offices now stand and of course no marina and very few boats in Maraspin Creek. What few houses there were at the Common Fields were a long way from the Mill Pond. However, I can remember when a lady in that area (who was said to own a spy glass, complained to the State Police who had a sub-station at the rear of the Superior Court House. Now retired Lieutenant-Detective John F. “Jack” Dempsey came to the school yard and gave the boys “the word” but we were sure that there was a twinkle in “Jack’s” eyes and we concluded that he was just doing his duty. The Mill Pond was an ideal place to swim. Located just east of the mill site, it was divided roughly down the middle by a sand bar which was out of the water at low tide. South of the bar was called; “Little Deep” and the smaller kids swam and paddled around there. North of the bar directly in front of the flume was called the “Big Deep” and it really was. Only the older boys who were good swimmers swam there as you could never touch bottom or even see it. When you were proficient enough to swim across Big Deep and climb up the marsh bank on the other side you were accepted as one of the “big kids” and had reached a milestone in your life. To get back to the mill stone on the south bank, Joe Turpin who once owned the Barnstable Inn, hired George Seabury who was Ruth Mitchell’s father and father-in-law of Jamey Mitchell, to take his team of draft horses and a “stone boat” which was sort of like a toboggan and drag the mill stone up Mill Way and Main Street to the flower garden in front of the Inn. As I recall it, the mill stone was set up off the ground in such a way as to make a big round table of it but what became of it in later years I do not know. There was another feature of the Mill Pond which my father put to good use. We used to go over to Joe Crosby’s oyster shanty near the Oyster Harbors lift bridge in Osterville and bring back a bushel or half bushel of oysters in a burlap bag. We would tie a long line to the bag, fasten the other end of the line to a wooden stake in the marsh bank and throw the bag of shellfish into Mill Pond. That probably wouldn’t be a good idea in these days as you would be lucky if you found the rope to say nothing of the bag of oysters. Father said the combination of the salt seawater running into the pond with the incoming tide and mixing with the fresh water from the springs further up the creek and running out when the tide turned, was just what the oysters liked as it tended to make them fat, juicy and tasty. We would take some home from the bag about once a week, ostensibly for oysters on the half shell but they never really got beyond the kitchen sink where they were eaten as fast as my father could open them.

When my father, Alfred Crocker, Jr. was a young fellow, there was a plank bridge supported by large wooded piles across Maraspin Creek to the Common Fields. I have a photograph of him and another young lad sitting on the edge of that bridge with their legs dangling over the side. Father was wearing a derby hat cocked to one side at a rakish angle and the other boy was wearing what looked like a straw hat or “boater”. There were three large wooden, box-like structures floating under the bridge which probably were for keeping eels or shellfish alive. It seems to me that they might have been called “cockle cars”. I do not remember the wooden bridge but there have been two concrete bridges in my memory, including the present one. The first concrete bridge at one time had a huge metal pipe beneath it with a large wooden clapper valve at the westerly end which was closed when the incoming valve

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

pressed against it and opened up when the outgoing water from the Mill Pond flowed through the open easterly end of the pipe with the ebb tide. The clapper valve eventually became partially unhinged and hung at an angle which prevented it from opening properly. It was never maintained or repaired and was eventually removed with the pipe. When the present bridge was being built the contractor put up a narrow temporary foot bridge across the marsh to the east so that pedestrians would not have to walk the long way around Commerce Road and Main Street to get to the village. On the west side of Mill Way, just south of the concrete bridge, there was a fairly long pier into Maraspin creek with a ramp down to a float where four or five skiffs and or dories were usually tied up. This was an attractive place for a small boy to play or fish from and one day I fell off the float into the creek. Lois Maraspin (Perry), now Assistant Librarian at the Barnstable County Law Library, happened to be there too and she was able to pull me out by the hair of my head. Incidentally, "falling in" seemed to run in my family as my brother John did that too while playing around a spring at the edge of the marsh in back of what was, at that time the millinery and dressmaking shop of the Misses Annie, Gertrude, and Myra Hinkley, now Raymond Frisbee's barber shop. Barbara Holmes (Neil), now clerk of the Superior Court of Barnstable County, whose house at that time was directly on Main Street, next to and east of the present Whale's Tooth antique shop, was playing nearby and she pulled John out by the hair of his head. John and I would be out of luck if we fell in today as you would realize if you saw us with our hats off. I feel that my brother and I may have inherited our tendency to fall into water as my eleven year old grandson, Danny Fontneau, is forever kidding me about our pilgrim ancestor, John Howland, (*Crocker*), who fell overboard from the Mayflower during a severe storm on the way to "Cape Codd". Bradford's "History of Plymouth Plantation" describes this incident as follows:

"In sundrie of these stormes the winds were so feirce , and ye seas so high as they could not bear a knot of saile, but were forced to hull, for diverce days together . And in one of them, as they thus lay at hull, in a mighty storme, a lusty young man (called John Howland), coming upon some occasion above ye grattings , was, with a seele of ye ships throwne into (ye) sea, but it pleased God yt he caught hould of ye top-saile halliards, which hunge over board and rane out at length; yt he held his hould (though he was sundrie fadomes under water, till he was held up by ye same rope to ye brime of ye water, and then with a boat hooke and other means got into ye ship againe and his life saved; and though he was something ill with it, yet he lived many years after, and became a profitable member both in church and comone wealth."

I seem to have digressed somewhat from my Mill Way theme; so to get back to the beach end of it; I remember a small bath house with wooden stairs about where the concrete steps are now. There was also a sort of shanty town of perhaps five or six fishing shacks on both sides of the road where shellfish men opened their catch and in some cases lived there for a time. Two such old timers that I remember were Louie Rice and John Hawes. Louie, if I recall correctly smoked a T.D. clay pipe and was said to include an occasional seagull stew in his diet. John Hawes was very flat footed and could be heard coming from a long way off on his trips up Mill Way to the village. Between that end of Mill Way and what is now Sunset Lane, a little south of where Freeman and Etta Crosby now live, Captain Ensign C. Jerauld, the father of long time County Treasurer Bruce K. Jerauld, maintained an outdoor springtime operation where he and his crew tarred the nets for his offshore fishing weirs. Barrels of tar were

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

melted by steam; the nets or twine as they were called was dipped into the black liquid which was hot, sticky and very pungent. A block and tackle was used to haul the tarred twine onto a red flat bet cart with large wide steel wheels which was hauled by "Lady", Captain Jerauld's horse, to the Common Fields where it was spread out to dry.

This was the area where my great grandfather Loring Crocker and his brother Nathan, along with many others had vast "strings" of salt works which included windmills and wooden pipes to pump salt water into hip roofed vats to be evaporated by the sun and turned into salt. There is only one building left there which was connected with the manufacture of salt. This was called the "Salt Store" and was used for storage of the final product. It was later used as a bunk house for Captain Jerauld's fish weir crew. It has been turned around so that the end of it now faces Commerce Road and what was formerly the front of the building faces west. It has been made into a dwelling house and is at the corner of First Way and Commerce Road. A picture of the salt works taken in 1870 shows this building as it looked at that time.

When I was very small, a circus was held on the Common Fields in the area between Mill Way and Second Way where all the dwelling houses are now located and it was later planted to rye which I and some of my friend helped my grandfather to harvest. The northerly boundary of the Common Fields from the end of Mill Way over to the end of Bay View Road is a high bank overlooking the beach, Barnstable Harbor and Sandy Neck. In the early 1900's there were only about four buildings there which were used as dwellings. In the one nearest Mill Way lived Isaiah H. Smith, a talented land surveyor, photographer, physical fitness devotee and Lieutenant of the Barnstable Platoon of the Massachusetts State Guard during World War 1. I think he received his military training at the government camp in Plattsburgh, New York. He always carried himself very erect; "straight as a ramrod", and was forever exhorting us boys to do the same and exercise. He frequently quoted excerpts from the "Plattsburgh Manual". When discussing land boundaries of wood lots, of which he was considered an authority, he would squat down with a short stick and mark it all out on the dirt sidewalk. The building east of Isaiah Smith's was used by a group from off-Cape as a gunning camp headquarters for duck hunting expeditions into the Great Marshes. The dwelling next to that is now owned and occupied year round by the G. Malcolm Hixon family and was originally part of the cottage colony on Sandy Neck. My grandfather acquired it from Marcus N. Harris and had W. Davis Holmes, local builder and probably Shirley and Leston Lovell and Herby Lovell's grandfather Herbert; well known boatmen, float it across the harbor. I was taken down to the beach to see it landed and I think it was on four dories but I was probably less than ten years old at the time and only remember it floating serenely at the water's edge ready to be pulled onto the beach and up the bank. A little further to the east was a cottage occupied in the summer by the Hancock sisters from Boston, relatives of George Alexander who used to visit them as a boy and who is now retired and living with his wife Helen,(passed in 1987), in a house on First Way not far from where his aunts used to summer.

Further over to the east side of the Common Fields bordering Meridian Way are the Meridian Stones which were set in 1871 to point true north for the convenience of surveyors who wished to check and adjust their instruments. The history of these stones is set forth in the Barnstable County Registry of Deeds, Book No 106 – Page 80 under date, April 11, 1871 as follows:

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

“Loring Crocker to County of Barnstable, in consideration of \$25.00, lease, demise and let the right to have, keep, and maintain in and upon the land of said Loring Crocker, in a place called “Common Fields” on the northerly side of said Town of Barnstable, Three Stone Posts, which are now located thereon by said County for the purpose of perpetuating a true meridian line under Chapter 286 of the Acts of the year 1870, and any and all parties who have or shall have a right to make use of said posts, or meridian line, may enter upon the land adjacent to said posts and between the same so far as may be necessary or convenient for the use of aforesaid. And the County Commissioners of the County of Barnstable and any person by them designated may enter upon said land for any purpose connected with said posts. To have and to hold to the County of Barnstable for the term of 99 years with the right on the part of the said County to renew this lease for a like term and at the same rate as herein provided and whenever upon the expiration of a lease the County aforesaid cannot agree with the owner of said land as to the terms of a new lease, said County may remove said posts from the lands aforesaid. Witness my hand and seal the Eleventh Day of April, 1871. (Signed) Loring Crocker.”

Whenever I have bought a different automobile, it became necessary to adjust the compass which I like to have above the dashboard and I have used the Meridian Stones several times for this purpose. I get a feeling of nostalgia when I do this and wonder what great grandfather would say if he could see me. The developer of this property was not very imaginative and named some of the streets in the Common Fields area, First Way, Second Way and Third Way. The street beside the Meridian Stones was to be called Third Way but now retired Kenneth D. Greene, once the Fire Chief and long time Superintendent of the Water Department of the Barnstable Fire District prevailed upon the developer to change the name to Meridian Way, and that’s the Way it is.

I seemed to have strayed far, east of Mill Way in this miscellany, and, as it was my intention to confine myself to that area I shall have to go west and south to where I previously left off near the bridge. This brings to mind the strip of land to where the present town-owned dock and boat ramps are located, on the east side of Maraspin Creek. When the use of small boats in this area was mostly confined to shell fishermen with skiffs and dories and a few recreational boaters who lived in the village, my grandfather thought that, inasmuch as there was no public landing in the creek, he would like to give a piece of land to the town for this purpose and that is what he did. If he could have looked into the future and seen recreational boating as it is today with outboard motors on good sized boats and automobiles with boat trailers. I am sure he would have deeded over a much larger piece of land but, at the time the gift was made, the area was more than adequate for the purpose. Coming to the present Mill Way Marine Service area, my family sold a piece of marsh where these buildings are now located to the late John E. Vektorino who was engaged in trap fishing at that time. Soon after this, a suction dredge came into the creek to widen and deepen the area for the town. The discharge pipe was directed onto land which my family owned where the new sewer pumping station is located. While the dredge was working along the shoreline in front of Captain Vektorino’s acquisition, a piece of marsh bank collapsed and fell into the creek and was sucked up by the dredger. John jokingly said to me, “Dave, I bought this land from you and now the dredger is sucking it up and pumping onto your land on the other side of the creek.” Subsequently, Captain Vektorino purchased from my father, the two and one half story wood frame building known as the “Corner Store” which was situated at the corner of Mill Way and Main Street next

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

to the house where my brother John lives. (3310 Main Street) Captain Vektorino used the building at the Main Street location for three years to store fish nets, anchors, and other gear in connection with his fishing business. In 1949 he and his employees took down the building, piece by piece, and moved the material to his land at the creek where it was used to build his fish packing plant. Even the windows and shutters were used which is a far cry from the way valuable buildings are demolished and hauled to the dump today. The Vektorino family later sold the property to be used as a marine supply facility which it is at this time. When the old "Corner Store" was built at the head of Mill Way it was no doubt for a typical country store. The late Ms. Mary A. Sprague in her portrayal of; "A Cape Cod Village from the 'Horse and Buggy' to the 'Space' Age", published in 1963, states that she could not remember the store in use (as such). I have heard the names of various proprietors but they escape me at the moment. Ms. Sprague was of course correct in her statement that the store was finally moved but it went in pieces to the other end of Mill Way to become Captain Vektorino's fish packing plant as stated above and was not, "the nucleus of a house in Yarmouth Port". The house in Yarmouth Port to which Ms. Sprague referred was actually my grandfather's barn which was north of the store in the fork of Mill Way and what used to be a road between my brother John's house and the Charles Clagg property. It was purchased from my mother in 1950 by the late Mrs. Ruby Wallwork of Yarmouth Port who hired the late "Bob" Hayden to move it to Wharf Lane in that village. "Bob" neatly sawed off the gable roof in Barnstable and moved the roof and building in two separate pieces and put them together again when they reached their destination. A salt box was built onto the back side and the completed building to Miss Isabel Garvey who transferred it into a charming dwelling house where she lives at the present time. I drive by there often and sometimes say to my wife, Louise, "I wonder if Miss Garvey knows that my grandfather used to keep pigs under the building, horses on the ground floor and that I kept pigeons in the loft?"

To get back to the Corner Store, I remember the long counters and shelves that were there and a hand cranked pump in the back room which was connected by a pipe under the floor to a hogshead in the cellar and was probably used for either kerosene or maybe molasses. There was also a large "Partners Safe" with two keys which required that each partner insert his keys as is now done with a bank safe deposit box. During World War II the Barnstable Fire Department held a scrap drive and the safe was donated to be broken up for munitions to aid in the war effort. This reminds me of an item that appeared in the Cape's daily newspaper at about that same time.

"Barnstable, October 9 – Another Cape landmark is going to help win the war. A500-pound iron sailing ship's capstan has been donated to the Barnstable Fire Department, which is collecting scrap metal, by Alfred Crocker JR of this village. The capstan was placed in front of Mr. Crocker's house about 15 years ago by his two sons, David and John and has been a familiar sight there since that time. The capstan was cast in August 1866 at the H.M. Stone Foundry in Boston. On it are cast the words, 'Edson's Patent'. About 25 years ago Mr. Crocker's father, Alfred Crocker SR, purchased an old barn in Bourne, in which the capstan was found. The barn was situated about where the middle of the Cape Cod Canal now is. The barn was moved to Barnstable near the site of the present fire station. Fifteen years ago, Mr. Crocker's sons thought the capstan would make a fine marker in front of their home and dragged it there on a stone drag. Mr. Crocker said yesterday, "I certainly am sorry to give up this souvenir, but if it can help to win the war I am glad to donate it. We must all do our part to help the war effort and I hope this little bit

MILL WAY MISCELLANY by David Loring Crocker 1909-1983

will be of some assistance." The capstan was accepted for the Fire Department by Kenneth D .Greene, acting chief"

A picture which accompanied this article shows John Greene, five years old, son of Kenneth Greene, perched atop the old capstan.

As Tom Kane, noted Truro historian, would say, "But I digress". My best memory of a business in the old "Corner Store" was that of Miss Fanny L. Young, who had an old fashioned ice cream parlor there when I was a small boy. I lived next door and dropped in there often, naturally. She bought her homemade ice cream from a Mr. Howland who lived on Meeting House Way in West Barnstable, and had an ice cream parlor of his own there. When some of Fanny's freezers were almost empty she would put them outside on the back door step and, if I was nearby, I would be allowed to take a spoon and dig out what was left around the bottom of the tall metal container, which probably accounts for my fondness for ice cream to this day. Other occupants of the building, not at the same time, were on the second floor and included the first telephone exchange switchboard in Barnstable Village where the late Miss Myra E. Jerauld was the first telephone operator. The old switchboard is now in the Donald G. Trayser Memorial Museum, nearby. In subsequent years, the late Charles C. Dixon had a barber shop there; the Sons of Veterans had a meeting place there complete with their ceremonial swords and other regalia; and the United States Coast & Geodetic Survey had a field office there. The village scales for weighing hay, cattle, coal or other commodities were located at the south east corner of the building. I have a photograph of an unknown farmer weighing an ox on these scales. During World War I, a large Service Flag with red border, white field and a blue star for each person from Barnstable village who was in the armed services was suspended over Main Street from the peak of the "Corner Store" to the roof line on the house of Dr. Charles Milliken, across the street. It was my job to tack up war posters of all kinds in the front windows of the then vacant store. Having reached the approximate end of the space allotted to me at this time by Mrs. Barbara Williams of the Barnstable Patriot, I must end these recollections for now but it seems to me that I have only scratched the surface as to how Mill Way used to be. In closing, I should like to say that I hope to always see Mill Way written as two words, each capitalized and no Street, Road or Lane added. Mill Way was the Way to the Mil. That's the Way it was and to quote the esteemed Walter Cronkite, "That's the Way it is."

David Loring Crocker May 10, 1980