

Miscellaneous Anecdotes

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“Living Lore” Series

Francis Donovan, Thomaston, Connecticut

December 20, 1938 MISCELLANEOUS LOCAL ANECDOTES

“You live to be my age, boy, and you see a lot. But I'll bet you there ain't many men around here remember the things I do. You find any with any better memories than me, in your

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travels? I often thought if I'd gone to school, and could handle them big words, and had the proper education, what with my memory, I would have been something.

“When I was a shaver, I went to school for a while at the old academy. Dan Webster was the teacher--he was mayor of Waterbury afterwards. Well sir, the day Barnum's circus played in Waterbury, a bunch of us kids heard somehow that the special train had gone off the track down by the quarry. There was a stonewall down there, and a switch track. We played hooky from school and went down there, and sure enough the last car had jumped the track and toppled into the river. Some was injured, but there wasn't nobody killed.

“John Stuart was on the train. It was carryin' a big bunch of people down to see the circus. And John, he waded across the river and come up the road to bring the news uptown. The old cars were made of wood, and they were small, but they wasn't nobody killed. Here, I want to show you something.”

Mr. Botsford goes into the “front room,” reappears with two small, well varnished pieces of light-colored wood. “Slats from the window of that train,” he says proudly.

“Now they's another time there was a cloudburst, and up at 2 Lead Mine Brook they was a washout and the train went over. The last car went down the river way past the bridge and finally lodged against a bank. Nine persons was drowned in that wreck. When the word got around town people grabbed clotheslines and poles and lanterns, --it was at night --and went up to see could they help. Larry McDermott, he was conductor on the line afterwards for a good many years, well, he was on that train as water boy. He got saved. One fellow held onto the baggage car door, and he got pulled out. There was one man, I forget his name, they couldn't find. His wife was stayin' in Thomaston, over at somebody's house on Chapel street. She looked across the river in the mornin' and she thought she saw a body lyin' in the bushes by the movement shop. She got the notion it was her husband, and she started to cry and carry on, but they wouldn't let her go over there. And sure enough when they went to look, it was her husband.

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“That must have been in 1867--I was a very small boy at the time. Them were the two worst train wrecks we ever had in Thomaston...”

Mr. Botsford remembers that he has never shown me his snapshots. He brings out a huge batch, many of them scenes from the Adirondacks, where he has spent summer vacations for many years. It is increasingly evident that Mr. Botsford is a nature lover. His little jaunts into the country begun aimlessly when he first acquired a car many years ago have resulted in a deep appreciation of landscapes and horizons and waterfalls and what he calls “views,” so that when he sets out on a trip these days it is with the idea in mind of seeing some particularly attractive natural display. He has vivid recollections of the trips he has taken 3 through Western Connecticut and upper New York state and is fond of describing them, of mentioning with the pride of a discoverer, out of the way places “not fifty miles from here,” where some phenomenon of nature may be seen, or where there is a “Lover's Leap,” known only to the initiate. Says he:

“Most people when they start out for a trip, they say, “Let's go over to Jim's in Canaa,' and off they go. They don't pay no more attention to the countryside, or to landmarks, than if they was travelin' blindfold.

“But you go with me, and I can point out things to you, I'll tell you ‘A mile above here, there is a fine old bridge; or, here's where the road turns off to that waterfalls!

“I like to go over a road both ways. Because when you're drivin' a car you got to be careful and you can only look on one side. And if you come back over the same route, you can see the things you missed on the way up, see what I mean?

“The roads have been changed so much the last few years, it's all you can do to keep up with 'em. I see places where they's been whole towns cut off, because they switched the road in another direction. There's a little place called Beaverbrook over here near New

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Milford, where that happened. It happened up in [Rawling?], New York, and that's a good sized town. Some of the old landmarks are disappearin'.

"There's a valley up in New York state I wish you could see, for it's one of the sweetest sights I ever lay eyes on. You come up on top of this hill and you look down, and there it is before you, all pines, as far as you can see. You go down, and down, and 4 it's like dippin' into a cool green sea on a hot summer day. And what do you think they done? They cut the main highway off just before you come to it, and if you want to go through there, it's an out of the way trip.

"They're goin' to do the same thing down here to Howd's Mills, they say. There's one of the prettiest spots in this section of the state. New Yorkers come up here, and they rave about that there road. Of course it's a little narrow. I suppose they got to blast through when they're buildin' a highway, but it seems a shame. There's a seven mile stretch up between New Boston and Otis where they done that, and it's as barren as it can be.

"I got something else here I want to show you, long's we're lookin' at pictures." Mr. Botsford emerges from the "front room" with still another album from an apparently inexhaustible supply.

"These are all post-cards and greetin' cards." He holds up a "view of Plymouth Hollow, 1852."

"There's the tannery, and the Case shop and the cemetery. There used to be a grove of apple trees up there, before they started the cemetery. Well sir, this hurricane we had little while ago blew down an apple tree that grew from the last seedlin' of that grove.

"They made postcards out of everything, years ago. Here's one of Green Pond. See what they called it on the card? Emerald 5 Lake! Get the connection? Here's one of the old wire room, down' the shop. See that machine there? I worked in the draftin' room when that machine was designed and I helped design it. I know every bolt and nut on it.

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“Here's one from the Adirondacks. Saint Patrick's day card. See what it says? ‘To that Irishman called Mike’. Know who that was? Me! And that name is as dear to me as my right name.

“I never was called Mike any place else. But up there, they never called me by any other name.”

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