

[William L. Gilbert Library]

W14986 [(Humiston)] Conn 1938-9 WILLIAM L. GILBERT MEM. LIBRARY.

Rev. Wallace Humiston, pastor of the Northfield Congregational Church for the past twenty five years, librarian of the William L. Gilbert Memorial library is said by residents of the village to have extensive knowledge of the Peck family, and of early history of the community. "Mr. Humiston is a great one for collectin' that kind of stuff. You ought to go see him."

The library occupies a large room on the lower floor of the parsonage, and I arrive before the opening hour, but am invited by the woman who answers the door to "go right in and wait for Mr. Humiston," who will be "dwon directly." The Reverend Mr. Humiston, it develops, occupies bachelor quarter upstairs in the old house, while the first floor rear rooms are tenanted by a childless couple who look after the place.

There are perhaps a dozen racks of books, most of them of ancient vintage and bearing signs of much handling, in the big high ceilinged room. A lower shelf near the door contains bound copies of magazine, some of which, like St. Nicholas, have not been published for many years. On a deal table are copies of late periodicals, including the flamboyant picture variety, and they are likewise the worse for wear.

The librarians desk contains many volumes currently gracing the best seller list, which because of special demand may be kept no more than a week. To the right and just above the door, is a gilt framed portrait of a dark gentleman with a formidable pair of side whiskers to whose generosity the book loving villagers owe this oasis in what must have been at the time of its inception particularly arid soil for the literate.

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In Gothic lettering is the inscription: "William Linus Gilbert, donor, Northfield Library, also Gilbert Home in Winsted, school, etc., Born, Dec. 20, 1806, died Winsted, June 29, 1890. He learned How to Work and How to Give."

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Rev. Mr. Humiston enters, and after a brief greeting takes his seat behind the desk. He carries a small amplifier, to which is attached a pair of earphones, explains that he is extremely hard of hearing, and that it will take a short time for this apparatus to "warm up."

"All right now," he says presently, and I make known the nature of my mission.

"Well," he says, "I have a few little things that may be of value to you. Of course I don't remember old Jeremiah Peck, Jerry, they used to call him, but Howard was still alive when I first came to the village, and in fact I was the one who discovered him the morning he died.

"I went to call on him and found him lying on the floor. He was quite dead. Uremic poisoning. He lived along, towards the last, though when I first came here I believe he had a housekeeper. He owned quite a few houses in Northfield, and I presume he was in comfortable circumstances. If you'll excuse me a minute I can tell you the exact date of his death."

Mr. Humiston hurries upstairs, returns shortly with a venerable volume which he deposits on the desk, together with sundry other articles. He hands me a card on which is inscribed the birth date of Howard Peck (Nov. 26, 1847) and the date of his death (Sept. 24, 1926.)

"There are numerous anecdotes about the family undoubtedly," says Mr. Humiston. "I should hesitate to repeat them because it is difficult to know just which are authentic and which are spurious. The old man was very fond of children. They had the first Sunday school picnic in the village some time in the seventies and the Pecks were instrumental in organizing it. They would stay up all night, it is said, to get the wagons and other things

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ready for a picnic. They were great church-goers, and the old man was an active worker in the cause of temperance.

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“There was another brother, Will, who entered the ministry. I have here a catechism of his.” Mr. Humiston hands me a little pamphlet, “A New Catechism of the Protestant Christian Faith, arranged and issued by Rev. William J. Peck, Corona, New York.”

“Northfield has a very interesting history. Down in the old knife shop—have you learned anything about that—at one time, before the advent of the knife industry, they manufactured what they called pormanteaus. Now I've always thought of a portmanteau as a sort of trunk, but here's what they made there.” Mr. Humiston indicates a small leather purse, with compartments for coins and cards.

“As a matter of fact,” he continues, “the Pecks were not one of the old village families. The Humistons were perhaps the earliest settlers in these parts. Old Ben Humiston who died shortly after the war was the last of the family. My family? Oh, no, we came from New Haven, but there was a connection between us and the Northfield Humistons.

“And here,” handing me the old book,” is the Northfield history, sponsored by the church.” I turn the pages, to learn that Northfield was “formed into a school district in 1774 (Dec. 27) and that a petition for a “winter parish” was made March 27, 1775 by Roger Marsh and “32 others” but that the proceedings were interrupted by the Revolutionary War. The petition was refused twice by the General Assembly, but the village fathers, undaunted, kept up the fight until 1789, when it was finally granted.

Our perusal of the history is noisily interrupted by the entrance in rapid succession, of at least a dozen children, ranging in age from eight to fourteen, and Mr. Humiston is kept busy marking borrowed books and accepting returned volumes. There is no attempt to observe the rule of silence generally enforced in libraries, the the hubbub is terrific.

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The harrassed Mr. Humiston occasionally administers 4 a milk rebuke, to which not the slightest attention is paid.

An elderly lady, returning a book, is forced to shout almost directly into the reverend gentleman's earphones Mr. Humiston raises his voice above the din.

“This is Mrs. Goodwin,” he says. “She is quite interested in local history and she may be able to help you.” Mrs. Goodwin, a friendly, garrulous individual, smiles an acknowledgement, and turns once more to Mr. Humiston.

“I enjoyed that book immensely” she says. She refers to “Through the Looking Glass,” which she has just returned. “I think I like it even better than ‘Alice.’” And this is the fourth time I've read it.”

Mr. Humiston: “I've read it several times myself.”

Mrs. Goodwin: “Have you by any chance got that new book? Grandma Calls It Carnal?” (Addressing me) “Mr. Humiston has been laughing at me ever since I asked for it. He says if I knew what the word meant I wouldn't be so anxious to read it. Of course I know what it means. But the title intrigues me. I want to read it.”

Mr. Humiston: “You may find it disappointing.” He turns to a youngster clamoring for attention.

Mrs. Goodwin: “Are you from a paper? I do quite a bit of newspaper work myself. I write the Northfield news for the Thomaston paper. The publisher is always after me to do some feature stories—you know Northfield is just full of lore—but I haven't the time.

“Have you by any chance found out anything about Captain Marsh? I've been trying to got some data on him for months. He lived just above here and kept the old tavern for a while.

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And Jesse Grant. You know the Grants were related to General Grant. Oh, my, yes. Oh Northfield is just crammed with interesting history.

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“But I haven't the time to look up all the facts. You know my husband is ill, and he used to take care of the school, fix the first and sweep up and so forth, and now I have to do it. And between that and the newspaper work it keeps me fairly busy.

“The Pecks? Oh, yes, why we used to live right in the same house with Howard at one time. I believe I have some poetry that he wrote, or his father wrote, in one of my scrapbooks. And that anonymous poem about Northfield. We're quite proud of that. You must see that. You give me a little time to look them up, and come up to the house some day and I'll have them ready for you. Provided I can find them.

“Well, I must be goin. I really must. School is out, and I have to go to work. I'll look up those poems for you. Good day. Good day Mr. Humiston.” But Mr. Humiston, busily engaged with the younger patrons, fails to hear. He gazes at me vaguely as I thank him for his courtesy a few minutes later, and it is plain that he was on the point of forgetting my presence.