

Memories of Wilmot: Arthur and Annie Thompson

09/05/22 Transcript

Summary

In this documentary, Charles Thompson, and his sister Elizabeth "Liz" Thompson Kirby share stories of their parents' life in Wilmot, New Hampshire. This interview was recorded on October 10, 2020, by the Wilmot Historical Society members Judy Hauck, Lindy Heim, and Fred Ögmundson at the home of Charles Thompson in Wilmot, New Hampshire.

Transcription

Lindy: Charles, I understand that your father was as an influential man in the town of Wilmot when he was growing up here. Can you tell us a little about it?

Charles: Yes, it didn't seem to me at the time that he was influential it just seemed that he was doing his thing, but in retrospect I guess he was. He was born in 1904 and died in 1982 at the age of 78. He went to the public school here in Wilmot, and then he went to the Kearsarge School of Practice, which is the apartment building now in Wilmot Center. Following that he went to Tilton School.

His grandmother and grandfather [Benjamin and Imogene Emons] were very industrious prosperous people in the town of Wilmot, and I think that's probably where the funding came from to send him to the private school. He was at Tilton School. He worked in the kitchen and also waited on table with the former senator from New Hampshire, Norris Cotton. He talked about he and Norris Cotton while they were doing dishes singing hymns down in the kitchen. Norris went on to be the senior senator in New Hampshire and my father went on to come back here and be a farmer. That was one of the reasons that he was not drafted into World War II, because he was a farmer and had a farmer's exemption from World War II.

The Grange at that time was a very important organization in the country and in the northeast. It was the lobbying organization for farmers and a business promoter. It got a lot of things done that might not have been done otherwise. The REA, the Rural Electrification Act, was one of them. They were big on schooling, and my father was deep in Grange work, as were his parents.

He also happened to be an insurance agent for the National Grange Mutual Insurance Company. He never went out and sold insurance, but if somebody needed insurance, they would come to him, and he'd get the insurance. One such family who lived here in town were very poor, and their house burned down. Right afterwards, the day of it, or the day after, I was in the house and my mother was going through insurance policies and I said, "what are you looking for"? And she said, "I'm looking for their insurance policy." And I said, "they had fire insurance? And she said, "yes they did." And I said, "how could they afford fire insurance?" I wasn't even sure we could afford fire insurance. And she stopped, and turned and looked at me and said, "your father paid the premium." I never forgot that. The house is now gone, it was on Shindagan Road. And that was sort of an example of him.

Before that time [from 1925-1927], my father was a page and a messenger in the legislature. His grandmother, Imogene Emons, was the second lady to be elected to the legislature in New Hampshire after it was allowed. And she might have had something to do with getting him that job, I don't know.

Following that he was a farmer, and he became very involved in the civic organizations here in town. I'll have to read them to you because I'll never remember them all. He was first of all, a delegate to the constitutional convention here in the state, and a delegate to the Merrimack County Convention. He was a representative to the General Court for ten years in the late 60s early 70s, and he took that very seriously. They paid one hundred dollars a year, and it wasn't exactly a moneymaker. He was a school moderator for 10 years, until the Kearsarge Regional School District was formed. He was the school auditor for 10 years. He was the school treasurer for 30 years, that was until the school district was formed; town moderator for 34 years; town auditor for seven years; and town treasurer for 38 years. [He was a charter member of the Wilmot Fire Department and a member until he died.]

He probably would have kept more of those jobs, but there was a law passed that you could no longer have some of those jobs concurrently. [i.e.] You could no longer spend the money and earn the money at the same time. He stayed on as town treasurer.

Liz: And he was town treasurer at the time he died.

Charles: He was town treasurer at the time he died, that's right.

Liz: He had just been re-elected.

Charles: School was closed on Town Meeting day. Town Meeting was held on the second Tuesday of March, as it is now. It started at nine in the morning and got through by twelve. The Grange ladies put on a dinner in what is now the Joyce Tawny Creativity Lab. The moderator and the town clerk were up on the stage. At one time during one of the town meetings, someone stood up and suggested that the town treasurer's salary be raised. The salary at the time was seventy dollars a year. And my father stood there and shook his head. He didn't want to take a raise. He was content with what he was making.

He was very involved in the church. The Wilmot Flat Baptist Church burned in 1944 and the women of the community, women of the church, were largely responsible for earning the money to rebuild it. He was a Sunday School superintendent for a period of time, he was very involved in getting new ministers when one had to be procured.

The lumber used to build the church came from our property as did the lumber for the old fire station. That came from our property as well.

Getting back to the church, it was a big part of his life. He had a very deep faith that permeated just about everything he did, and that was one of his leading characteristics – that and honesty. One of the selectmen in town told me once, “if Arthur Thompson said it, then it was probably right.”

Fred: Liz, would you tell us about your mother?

Liz: Our mother was the family's unsung hero, the stabilizing influence that kept our family focused on a productive future.

Annie Rose Whittemore was born on January 26, 1910, on a farm in West Andover on Route 4. Like the Thompsons, her ancestors were very early settlers of New Hampshire in this part of the country. She was the oldest surviving child of Charles and Sarah Whittemore. She had two older sisters who had died in infancy, she had two younger brothers immediately following her, and then two younger sisters after that.

She completed her elementary education and graduated from Proctor Academy. At that time the local kids went to school there. It was co-ed, and the town paid for their tuition. After that she went to Keene Normal School, which was a two-year teacher preparation school resulting in a certificate for teachers.

Our mother taught in the North Wilmot White Pond one room schoolhouse from 1930 to 1931, and there she had grades 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8 and had nine pupils. From 1931 to 1935, she taught at Wilmot's North Road School, teaching all eight grades. She introduced French to the students, which probably was a bit of a surprise to the kids in North Wilmot, New Hampshire.

Lindy: So, Liz, I have a question for you. How is it that your mom, Annie Thompson, was able to teach French at the North Road School at that time?

Liz: She learned French from her mother and was self-taught somewhat—also, Latin. As a matter of fact, when she was boarding with the Davenport family in North Wilmot and teaching at the North Road School, she tutored the Davenport girls in Latin during the evening as well as teaching French in the daytime. She had learned French at Proctor Academy. As a matter of fact, she got honors.

Charles: That's right.

Liz: When she graduated from Proctor Academy, she was given a five-dollar gold piece as a prize for excellence in French and Latin. She loved the languages, and she really was able to teach them very well to a lot of people.

From 1935 to 1936 she worked as a teacher in Hooksett, New Hampshire. The school was on the east side of the Merrimack River and her boarding house was on the west side. The 1936 spring flood from the major rains and the snowmelt was devastating to everybody in this part of the country. When the flood came, she was in her room in the boarding house watching her schoolhouse across the river. She saw the schoolhouse wash away in that flood. She also saw the brand-new set of encyclopedias, that she had just purchased with her own money, go down the river too. She never forgot that, and it was something that she mentioned from time to time as being a very hurtful thing in her life.

While she was teaching in North Wilmot, she was introduced to the Grange. The Atwoods, I believe, and possibly the Stearns, induced her to join the Grange. Soon after she joined the Grange, she found herself in the office of Secretary. During subsequent years, she was also the Master of the Grange, but she always seemed to go back to the secretary's job, and she did that until the Grange dissolved many years later.

Probably about 1933, the Grange Treasurer, who sat at the same desk as the Grange Secretary, was Leon Sawyer. He introduced (the Secretary) to the Grange Deputy. Now this was a person who was appointed by the State Grange to go to different Granges to represent the State Master and assist with the Grange's problems and make sure they were doing their ritualistic work correctly.

Arthur Thompson, before he was 30, was a Deputy of the New Hampshire State Grange, and one of the Granges that he visited was Wilmot Grange. So, Leon Sawyer decided that the single Arthur Thompson should meet the single Secretary, Annie Whittemore.

In January of 1934, Arthur Thompson's mother passed away, so he was left living alone at the farmhouse here on Cross Hill. It was not unexpected that he would be seeking a wife. He walked from here to West Andover many times to court her. After getting the consent of her parents, they were married on September 5, 1936, in West Andover, at her home, by Reverend Luther Kenniston, who was the uncle of Donald Hall, a poet in New Hampshire. Donald Hall's grandparents, Kate and Wesley Wells, were next-door neighbors of the Whittemore's, right across the Wilmot/Andover town line. So, Annie Thompson was the fourth woman to become a Thompson wife on Cross Hill.

She continued to teach school after she was married in Cilleyville. The house is at the corner of the road that goes up Kearsarge Mountain off Cilleyville Road.

I was her first child, and I was born on July 4, 1940. Three years later, in 1943, her second child was born—my brother Charles. She continued to be active with the Grange. She also joined and became involved with the church here in Wilmot when she moved to Wilmot.

The war years were hard. Both of her brothers were in the military overseas. Her two sisters were teachers and were working away from home. Her mother was at home in West Andover caring for my grandfather, who was getting progressively more ill. He died in 1944. It was very difficult because the two sons of the family were unavailable. They had no idea that their father had died until much later. It was quite a burden on the family to have to go through all this alone.

By this time, with rationing, there was no car. She did have a car in 1936 and for the few years thereafter, but it became impossible to maintain. So, they were dependent upon neighbors and friends to transport them.

Living in the farmhouse on Cross Hill in Wilmot, was very, very, difficult. She had no conveniences. There had been no modernizations. There was no electricity. No indoor plumbing. Unreliable running water. Heat was provided by wood stoves in two rooms.

She heated water on a black cast iron kitchen stove to wash clothes and dishes and her children. She fed wood into the stove to cook our meals. When there was a church or a Grange food sale, or supper, she cooked five loaves of bread on Friday in the oven of that wood stove.

Charles: Five more for us.

Liz: And five more for us. People lined up to get her five loaves of bread. It was very, very, good according to everyone else's opinion. Of course, for us, we would much rather have had bakery bread from Cutler's Store. But we survived and people did enjoy her bread, and retrospectively it was excellent. She always did what needed to be done. Her days were complete with the jobs of raising a family and keeping her home, yet she was always by our father's side at night riding in a wagon behind the horse or walking to a Grange meeting in Wilmot Center or in Wilmot Flat, a church service, or a town function that might have been deemed important.

When the war was over her brothers came home safely and got married. Her sisters got married and moved away. And things settled into a routine in Wilmot. Conditions did not improve for Annie. She continued to see that her children got the best care that she could provide, and she always encouraged us to read and learn.

Fred: Liz, we've reached the end of World War II and Annie and Arthur have two small children they're trying to raise. Where did things develop from that point?

Liz: Well, in 1952 a big change came about in our lives. Our mother was offered a school teaching position in South Danbury. Soon after the school year started, and in spite of the fact that she had not taught for probably 12 years, except for an occasional substitute teaching, she bravely, very bravely took on the job. The first change of course was that a car was purchased. She had to have a way to get to and from school. We were delighted at the fact that we now were going to have transportation.

Charles: And money.

Liz: And money! It was huge. Schedules were made for my brother and I to have a ride to school instead of always having to walk. She was now able to go to a laundromat rather than scrubbing clothes in a tub. She could drive to the grocery store herself to buy groceries. Changes did not happen overnight. A gas range was installed in the kitchen and gas space heaters were brought in to assist with winter heating. But the wood stoves were still in use. It was ten years later, in 1962, when electricity was brought to the farmhouse, and kerosene lamps were kept for emergencies only.

About the time she was retiring from teaching school, in 1975, she became a very active member of the Wilmot Bicentennial Committee, and when they did biographical sketches of the people on the committee what they wrote about her was,

She was never one to push her way anywhere. She has that quiet purposeful demeanor that gets things done. Annie was always fair-minded and contributed to all the decision-making of the Bicentennial, even if it was only with the shake of the head.

Our father died in 1982. The Thompson family farm was modernized and updated with central heat, artesian well, indoor plumbing, and insulation. She enjoyed living comfortably and continued to participate in her social and family activities until she died in 1992.

CREDITS

Wilmot Historical Society Members

Videographer: Judy Hauck

Interviewers: Lindy Heim and Fred Ögmundson

Photos

Wilmot Historical Society

Norris Cotton

New Hampshire Senator, 1954-1974

Photo source: Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norris_Cotton#cite_note-obit-1

Donald Andrew Hall

Photo source: Video interview with Gail Matthews and Stephanie Perkins Wheeler of "Kearsarge Valley Magazine"

Music

Teller of the Tales Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com)

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