

On the Other Side of the Pond

By Ed Smith

So dear old East Bridgewater is having a birthday ... 300 years since it was established and recognized as the East Parish of Bridgewater. Since I have been around for a fair part of that time, I thought I would pass along a few thoughts and memories and stories I have accumulated over the years about a part of town that seems to get overlooked. Maybe somebody might find them interesting. I can't swear to the accuracy of everything. Some I know for sure from personal experience and observation – I was there! Others are stories passed along to me by family and others and things as I understood them at the time. I believe them to be true and when known facts line up with the stories it kind of lends credence, but I'll leave the judgement and evaluation to others. I just hope you find them interesting for whatever they are worth.

Specifically, I want to talk about my stomping ground 'cause that's what I know about. Much has been written about much of the town from the purchase from Ousamequin at Sachem Rock, the tough times of conflict with indigenous people of the area (is that the currently politically acceptable term?), the East Parish, the First Parish Church, the Revolutionary War. (I recall reading how the local militia assembled on the common and "hastened" to Lexington – a long walk!) As the town grew and matured, I guess the villages emerged kind of centered around the schoolhouses – Beaver, Northville, Elmwood, etc. But again, much has been recorded about them. If you head down Plymouth Street or Washington Street towards Halifax you will run into Pond Street. According to some old maps, Elmwood kind of wraps around and includes this area, but there wasn't a whole lot there so I guess it didn't get much notice. If you go left on Pond Street it takes you around the north side of Robbins Pond. (Yes, that is the correct spelling. It was NOT named after the bird!) That's where Robbins Pond Park was with a well-documented history to be found elsewhere. I do remember the skating rink (lotsa holes in the floor) and the hundred-foot slide that just didn't quite make it to the water anymore. And I was there when the Lodge finally burned. I am not sure what was in there, but it bought me a trip to the hospital that night.

So let's back up to Washington Street. Otie Linton had his store on the corner of Pond and Washington. Had a whole display case of penny candy and you got 2 cents for every tonic bottle you found along the road walking up there. Keep going down to the end of Washington Street where it runs into Plymouth Street. Along the way on the left are all those little streets that run down to the pond with all the little lots with houses many of which were originally built as summer cottages – homes to many of us Pond Rats! On the other side of Washington Street at the intersection with Plymouth Street was Jo's Spa – a well-established watering hole run by – yes – Jo! But that is not Joe but Josephine and I believe she ran a tight ship. I would not know – never allowed to go in there. Now it is Johnny Macaroni's and I have been in many times.

Plymouth Street used to turn right there on what is now Old Plymouth Street and loop around to what is now the Rte. 104/Rte. 106 intersection. Halfway around another street ran off to the left and up over the hill to the pond. I believe there were a few houses back there probably on Lilian, Joseph and Rose Roads, but the interesting thing is that since East Bridgewater did not have a Main Street, that road to the pond was originally named – yup, you guessed it – Main Street. I do not know how or when it was changed to Robbins (not Robins) Road – maybe it never was. Sometimes things just happen. At the end on the water was the Casa Loma – another watering hole with a country western flare and a history, including its origin and demise that I will leave to others. To me it was a great beach to hang out on. Sometimes you could get a hot dog or a bag of chips out the back door. Again – never allowed to go inside!

So back out to Plymouth Street and keep going. Like I have said, up to here there has been a fair amount of history recorded, but now we are getting to the other side of the pond. I know Evelyn Waldorf (Robbins Pond Park) owned a lot of the East Bridgewater land along there, but before then is a little vague. I guess a good chunk of it was the Hudson homestead. Across from where Rte. 104 Old Plymouth Street comes into Rte. 106 Plymouth Street, up on the top of the hill there was an old cellar hole. I don't know if that was part of the original homestead or maybe an outbuilding, but it was there because we were sure there was treasure buried there, but we never found it. Further down Plymouth Street on the other side of the little frog pond there was a big old farmhouse complete with a huge barn – maybe that was the Hudson homestead – just don't know. Down the street a little there was the remains of an old roadside farm stand that we used to play in.

Now we are really on the other side of the pond and there are not a lot of houses left in East Bridgewater. There was the farmhouse that shows up on maps circa 1860. I am told the original house was further back where there are two cellar holes, but that it burned and the current farmhouse was a smaller replica. Not really sure what possessed Edward C. Ray to move down from Wolfboro, New Hampshire, where he had a boat building business on Lake Winnepesaukee, but he bought the farmhouse with a small barn and a henhouse from a lady by the name of Edna Snow (a well-known family with considerable property in town) and moved in with his daughter, Helen, and son Chester who was fairly recently discharged from service as a fighter pilot in the Army Air Corps World War 1. I don't want to make this a family history but I believe there were family connections and influences that contributed. The point is that Ed at some point went to work at the Carver Cotton Gin and Chet worked as a mechanic for the original Paul Clark Ford. Together they ran the farm complete with a roadside stand. Lots of other family history, but that is not what this is about. Along with the farm stand Helen started building rock gardens and selling plants from them. This grew into a little green house and then a shop that I was told was built from the lumber from the henhouse. Things grew and more greenhouses were added eventually to a dozen or more raising a large variety of plants and cut flowers. Remember this was before flowers were flown all around the world overnight. This and several other like growers in the area were substantial suppliers to the Boston Wholesale

Flower Market in the old Mechanics Hall. Another feature was the raising and sale of water plants with five outdoor pools (one pretty big) and one indoor with hardy and tropical water lilies and other water plants. Helen's specialties were cacti and African Violets – taking first prize in the Boston Flower Show for many years.

After World War II my father married and built the little house next door. I remember when they jacked it up and added a basement – kinda got things backwards.

Helen learned floral design and began providing that service training family members and many others for many years. Prom time meant hundreds of corsages and we proudly provided flowers for four generations of beautiful brides. This was Rays' Incorporated of East Bridgewater or Rays' Greenhouse or just Rays'. And, yes, that punctuation is correct – not Ray's but an effort by three Rays – Edward C. Ray, Chester M. Ray and Helen Ray Smith.

One of the crops raised on the old farm field for a while were gladiolas. This is significant because it involves manually digging and then replanting them every year. Many local high schoolers were hired for this task. The fun part is that in the process we and others found hundreds of arrow heads, but they were mostly broken. Contrary to what I had been told that they were broken in the process of making them, the archeologist who evaluated the Robbins Pond Park site for development not only corrected the story to say that since indigenous people could routinely and quickly produce arrow heads without breaking them, they were undoubtedly broken because they had been used in hunting and either broke if they struck a rock or, more likely, when they struck a bone. He further dated them showing that the area on the other side of the pond was an indigenous hunting ground 4000 to 7000 years ago. There's some history for you.

There was one more house next door, but I know little of the history other than a nice older couple lived there and it was probably of fairly new construction. The original house has been demolished and replaced.

When I was five or so I remember some kind of racket down back behind the field. Come to find out there was this guy who had come from Kansas. His name was Howard Hogue and he was a builder and had built several houses in the area. I don't really know what brought him here or the exact chronology and order of events but it seems he was also a square dance caller and a square dance teacher. He married a local young lady by the name of Marian Keith. I am not sure if she was teaching at the time, but she did end up teaching third grade at the Central School for about as long as I can remember. She also had a piece of land on Robbins Pond behind our place where I guess Hogie built their house. I am told this was Keith's Beach – a little sandy stretch along the shore – but this was not natural. The story goes that there were a group of local men who liked to hunt geese and I understand geese like sandy areas, so these guys trucked a bunch of sand in to improve the hunting – don't know – just the story I heard. One of

the men was probably Mr. Keith and I was told another was a young guy by the name of Robert K. "Pete" Winsor who became long time Fire Chief. Just what I have been told.

At any rate, Hogie and I guess Marian, too, although I just don't remember her dancing, were into square dancing and had many like-minded friends in the area. One thing led to another and they wanted to build a square dance hall. As I understand it, Hogie went to the South Weymouth Naval Air Station and bought a Recreation Hall that was being auctioned off to be removed. I am just guessing, but I bet he didn't have to pay a whole lot. He and his friends took it down, trucked it to town and put it back together – Voila! Square Acres is born. One problem was that the legal right of way to the property was across from the Rte. 104/Rte. 106 intersection through the swamp. Fortunately Hogie apparently got along well with Evelyn (remember her ... Robbins Pond Park?) who gave him a ten-foot-wide easement right along the edge of our field which became Quadrille Lane. (FYI – a quadrille is a dance similar to square dancing.) Don't go looking for Quadrille Lane – it's gone as is Square Acres, but it was quite a place in its heyday.

Square Acres grew with additional halls being added on to where there were nine dance halls under one roof. I know the Firemen's Ball was held there for many years and I believe the Policemen's ball as well. As attendance and popularity grew, people would travel long distances often with a travel trailer or coach and ask to stay in the parking lot for the night. This is how the campground started and then the day camp, etc. Far too many stories for here but it was quite a place. Square Acres advertised as being the largest square dance pavilion east of the Mississippi River and I don't believe that claim was ever challenged. Figuring the population of the town in 1960 was just over 6000 and our paid admission would run 700—800 people plus a sizable staff, the population of the town increased by about 15% every Saturday night.

So that is what was on the other side of the pond and I am sure a lot of people in town did not know then and do not know it now. But what was it like to live on the other side of the pond? Well, I guess it was a little different, but that was just fine with us. There were not a whole lot of us anyway. Us and a couple different families at Square Acres and in the old farmhouse up the street. Since I was the oldest, I was the first to start school. My bus stop was at Rte. 104 / Rte. 106, just about a quarter mile. My folks tried to get them to bring the bus down – plenty of room to turn around at the greenhouse – but were told that would add a whole mile to the route each day. Totally unreasonable. Now I am not saying I walked ten miles to school, rain or shine and uphill both ways, but it was Rte. 106 with no sidewalks. It was really no problem. We were out and about all the time whether walking up to Otie Linton's store or gathering up some kids for a ball game or to go sledding or fishing or whatever and we survived very nicely. We learned to be careful, to face traffic and be responsible for ourselves. But today can you just imagine letting, never mind requiring, a six-year-old boy to walk a quarter mile alone along a busy street with no sidewalks in a snowstorm? Today somebody would go to jail! But that's

how it was on the other side of the pond and we wouldn't have it any other way. Times sure have changed.

There are so many more stories to be told about this area of East Bridgewater little known to most. Across the street was Bridgewater with stories of its own. The cranberry bogs, the churches and their tent revivals, Smithstock, the airport idea, the condos, the Rough Riders, Thompson Marine, the dynamite bunker, the Sheparoos, the fires, the car crashes, etc. – but not here, not now. Maybe another time. I just hope somebody enjoys this account – longer than I intended – sorry. Don't reckon I will be around for the next 50 or 100 year observation, maybe this will survive and contribute. Happy Birthday.