



BHS November 2019 E-Newsletter

Edited by Eric Hooglund, Curator

Published Monthly for BHS Members

For this month's E-newsletter, we have a special treat: **A Story**, based on real events, and composed by Lawrence Sturtevant in 1984 or early 1985, after interviewing an elderly man, John Alexander, who recounted to him an event from his childhood, when he was a ten-year old farm boy living in North Belgrade during the summer of 1917. Sturtevant was a local historian who collected stories and artifacts about his hometown of Belgrade all his life, and his collections of photographs and diverse antique items were the original nucleus of the BHS collections. The story below never was published, but Sturtevant, who had been a camper at the legendary Camp Kennebec on Salmon Lake in the 1930s, and then a counselor there in the 1940s, sent this story to "a few chosen members of the Kennebec Mafia" in March 1985. BHS is grateful to one of those "chosen members," BHS member Bruce Trumper, for providing us a copy of this story. We think it is an entertaining view of real events and people whose memories deserve to be preserved. It is not the complete text of 11 typewritten pages, which would have been too long for our newsletter. The deleted sections appear as [...], and those paragraphs are digressions from the story about the history of youth camps in Maine and especially Belgrade or comments about books. Please enjoy, and don't be shy about sharing your reactions to it or any memories that it may prod!

Boy Teamster for Camp Kennebec

By Lawrence Marvin Sturtevant

It was in this early period [1900 to 1910] that the appropriate mix of athletics on the camp playing fields and wilderness trips was first devised and became generally emulated by all Maine camps. In the beginning no engine trucking existed and local farmers with their horses and carts and the railroad had to suffice. In North Belgrade, Bert and Arthur Alexander were often called upon to take their rigs to the railroad and bring hayracks of trunks and other freight to the camps.

It was on the morning of August 1, 1917, that Arthur Alexander called his young son, John, from his bed a little earlier than usual. The Alexander horses were watered, fed, and after a suitable interval, harnessed and backed into the hayrack pole. Arthur and young John busied themselves with the familiar tasks of hitching up the

pole to the yoke holding it to the front of the harnesses and the trace chains from tugs to whiffletrees, At this point, John, a tubby boy almost as broad as he was tall, placed in the rack a bag of grain, a water pail, and took reins in hand and stepped upon the pole and jumped into the hayrack directly behind his team. John had just passed his tenth birthday a few months before; he was the biggest little man in town as he took hold of his four-footed charges. A Kennebec camping party on the Sandy River had been washed out with torrential downpours, and the Alexanders had been called upon to go to their rescue and bring them home.

The little teamster said “Giddap” to his horses, turned them into the road heading north to Smithfield, Norridgewock and the Sandy River fording place to the Kennebec encampment he was expected to find. He quickly passed right next door his Uncle Harry Alexander’s pretty farm with its new tieup built just the year before (to handle the summer milk supply for Camp Merryweather), and soon passed out of sight.

As he slowly proceeded up over Bickford Hill, the big blue-painted Studebaker wheels crackling on the pebbles under the hayrack, he swelled with importance of his mission and being in charge of two draft horses and the large rig.

Going away from home, his horses lifted their feet slowly, but their steady pace took him over the road to Smithfield village, across the flats to the north of it, right by the well-kept farm of his Aunt Della Witham, and then on to Norridgewock plains. He was passing thorough some of the finest farm country in central Maine in those days. It was remarkably fair to see in that time and place, with farmers all along the way working amidst the pleasant odors of the fields on their hay, raking, pitching and loading, and cultivating their crops. As the changing scenes unfolded before the eyes of the little teamster, he found it all entertaining and exciting.



Team of Horses harnessed to hayrack, like the one the little teamster drove (although this one is full of hay, not camp gear! Guy Yeaton farm, Belgrade, ca. 1935-40; BHS Photo

In Norridgewock village the little teamster swung his horses to the left beyond the tall granite Civil War monument and then took the road to right leading to the Sandy River fording place. Here he crossed the rising waters and located the soaked Kennebec encampment, where he found all so happy to see him. It was well into the afternoon, so far was he from home upon his arrival, and much later after he had rested and fed and watered his horses. The day was fairly well spent when the little teamster finally gave his order: load your luggage, tentage and mount the hayrack. And then, heavy loaded as he was, he reined his team into the boiling waters of the Sandy, up on the south bank and over the road he had traversed that morning.

..... [H]e found his cargo [of city boys] much given to chattering away like magpies; he took brief note of it and mostly closed his ears and listened only to the hoofbeats of his horses. Heading homeward they seemed a little more alert now, with a great switching of tails and flicking of ears, as they brushed off the flies on their way through the streets of Norridgewock village and south through the green fields.

It was well into the evening and getting strangely dusk earlier than usual when he arrived on the outskirts of Smithfield village. His passengers had fallen silent and were resting under their ponchos, as he made his way up over the steep hill south of the village. When he reached the top, the boy teamster noticed dark clouds in the west. Then he saw a flash of lighting coming out of a black sky over the hills of Rome, so low it seemed he could almost touch it.

Just before he reached the Ernest Mosher farm in South Smithfield, the storm struck in all its fury. It came on dark, the thunder roared and the many lighting bolts were so close to the ground! They were striking all around Little Johnny and his shuddering, cringing passengers. On a wide belt towards the coast houses and barns were being struck and fires were breaking out.

The storm reached south through Augusta and Lewiston and far to the east. This was the first [World] War I year and soldiers were encamped at Camp Keyes on a hill west of Augusta. A soldier ... was struck and killed instantly in his tent about the same time that the storm hit the little teamster and his rig.

[.....]

In the meantime the quaking little teamster was making his way thorough South Smithfield and up the north slope of Bickford Hill, that he had ascended so boldly and confidently that morning, When he reached the pinnacle of the Hill he afterwards reported that, looking in all directions over Rome, Mt. Vernon, Sidney and Oakland, he could see 13 sets of farm buildings ablaze, with one directly below him in his home valley.

By now he was nearing Camp Kennebec. As he came near the Kennebec entrance, he found great excitement with campers and counselors running to-and-fro across the road carrying water to the Will Withers barn. This was the nearby fire he had seen from the top of Bickford Hill. Amidst the great roaring, a bolt had struck the Withers barn with an enormous crash; by the time the boy teamster arrived on the scene, the barn was almost entirely consumed. The farm house was saved. But little Lucille Withers, a babe in arms on that night, never forgot it and the terror she experienced; she was ever after somewhat neurotic about lighting storms.



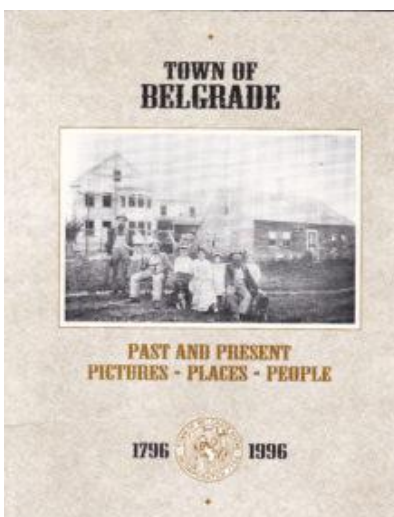
Will Withers loading a wagon in front of his barn, ca. 1915. This barn, next to Camp Kennebec, was struck by a lightning bolt on evening of August 1, 1917 and burned to the ground. (BHS, Martha Withers Pink Collection)

Shortly after, Little Johnny, as his father called him, said “Whoa” to his team, and deposited his exhausted boys and their baggage in the camp quadrangle. And then slowly and thoughtfully made his way home to his own stable, where his father and mother were anxiously awaiting his arrival. ...

But Little Johnny had accomplished the goal of every Belgrade Lakes guide: he had brought his party safely home through storm and danger.



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Capital Fund Drive



Rendering of Townhouse after Renovation

Sketch by Artist Erik Johnson

The **Capital Fund Drive** is going well! We have received several thousand dollars and returns are coming in on a daily basis. A friendly reminder to those who want to give and have not yet done so. Use your return envelope or send your own to BHS, P.O. Box 36A, Belgrade, Maine 04917. Use PayPal as an alternative by going to our website belgradehistoricalsociety@gmail.com.

Thanks to those who have already donated, all donations will help the bottom line!

Don't forget that BHS is a non-profit 501 (3) 2 organization, so all contributions to its capital campaign to renovate the Old Town House are tax deductible. Any donation you make to BHS can be deducted from your income tax to the extent allowable by law. Please think of making an end-of-year donation to our worthy cause and help to preserve our history.