

History Matters: Tales from East Lyme's Past

ROCK OF AGES

by Jim Littlefield - jnlittlefield@gmail.com

The MacKenzie Dairy Barn sat for many years on the Waterford side of the Niantic River, perched majestically on Durfee Hill overlooking both the mouth of our well-known river and the bridges that for many years have linked our two towns. Anyone traveling the Shore Road (Rt. 156), or who has lived in this area for any length of time, knew it well. I remember being inside that huge structure a number of years ago. It was big, cavernous, and almost cathedral-like.



Photo courtesy of Bob Nye

A friend of mine, George Sprague, had rented a small portion on the southeast side from owner Margaret MacKenzie for his carpenter business, but the Town of Waterford felt it had become unsafe and had condemned it, forcing his relocation.

Mr. Sprague asked me to help remove equipment he had on the premises. I recall that day looking around at the rest of the building and imagining how it must have looked during its heyday as a fully functioning New England dairy barn.

With its impressive beams and expansive ceiling, I could not help but also notice numerous openings starting to appear in the roof, allowing invasive shafts of sunlight to make their way to the floor below. Nature certainly could not be blamed for making a house call, having determined the structure to be unattended and uncared for since the MacKenzie family who owned it had gone out of the dairy business back in 1955. "If you have a house with holes in the roof," as the old New England saying goes, "then you will soon have no house." I knew those rays of sunshine heralded the demise of this grand structure. If bulldozers didn't get at it first, Mother Nature would certainly tackle the job.

Earlier when owned by the Caulkins and Chapman families, the land had been known as the "Rope Ferry Farm," due to its proximity to the rope ferry that shuttled locals back and forth across the river during those pre-bridge days. But current Waterford resident Allen Scott remembers the farm and specifically the barn as always belonging to the MacKenzie family. In fact, that name and that place had special meaning for this long time East Lyme resident, as he initially knew it to be the home of the little red-haired girl, the one he had met at the North Stonington 4-H Fair when he was just twelve years old.

The year was 1935; one year after the barn was built. "It was love at first sight, or at least it was for me," Reverend Scott recounted recently. "Mary MacKenzie had her sheep at the fair and I was showing off my prize chickens. She had the longest red pigtail I had ever seen. I was really taken by her and I could not get her out of my mind. When I got my driver's license a few years later I asked her out on a date, but she said her father would not allow it. I kept trying but the answer was always the same. Finally, when it came time for her to graduate from Chapman Tech, I was allowed to take her out, but we did have to take two other couples with us as chaperones." "Despite any early missteps," he continued, "I did begin to earn her and her family's trust and was allowed on the MacKenzie property, dairy barn and all. Mary and I were both from farming families and we had a lot in common. I knew she was the one for me when I first saw her at the fair."

Visiting with Reverend Scott recently at his Waterford home on the Niantic River, I found myself listening intently (much like I had done as a parishioner for many years in his church in Flanders) to his many recollections of times past, drawing from personal experiences spanning some ninety-two years. Although he never complained, I knew the last twelve had been the most difficult for him, after losing his beloved wife (that same Mary MacKenzie) in 2003. But his eyes lit up and he smiled whenever he talked about her and I wanted to hear more despite my original intent to simply gather as much information as I could about the family's dairy barn.

"Mary and her dad, Hugh, were the two in the family who did the majority of the milking in that barn," Mr. Scott offered. "They had 65 head of Holstein dairy cattle at one point and it was hard work despite the fact that they had electric milking machines. When the power went out during the hurricane of '38, they had to milk by hand and when they finished milking all of the animals, they basically had to start all over again. Later, when I was in the picture, Mary's dad asked me to give him a hand with the milking one day and said I didn't need to get there any too early...maybe around four o'clock in the morning would be fine. Farming is not an easy life."

The Scott name is easily recognizable in East Lyme and is still associated with farming in the Whistletown area at the north end of town. Scott's orchards continue to dot the landscape there. "I farmed until I was 47 years old," Mr. Scott related, "but eventually had to give it up because of my growing commitments as minister of the Flanders Baptist and Community Church. Mary and I were married in 1951 after my first year at Yale Divinity School and we soon found ourselves back home and living in the church parsonage on Boston Post Road. I had always loved farming and I dearly loved the ministry. I can still remember at five years of age playing in the dirt on our family farm and vowing that someday when I grew up I would become a minister. I never regretted that early decision or the work that went into it. Sometimes I don't think being a minister or being a farmer are that much different anyway," he added thoughtfully.

Returning to the subject of the MacKenzie dairy barn, Allen offered that he was only eleven years old when it was erected, but he knew that Mel Howard of East Lyme was the main architect for the project and he and Bill Manwaring were instrumental in its construction. It was well built by great carpenters, he said, many who were out of work due to the Great Depression. He remembered his father telling him there was a huge square dance held inside the building to celebrate its completion in 1934. Two bands were needed to play, one at each end of the massive 3,000 square foot structure. Allen's father, Wilfrid Scott, happened to be on the premises that day but not young Allen. He was home with his mother and the rest of the family, but young Mary MacKenzie, that girl with the long red-braided pigtail was in attendance, one year away from showing her sheep at the 4- H Fair in North Stonington.

As Allen and I continued to talk about the MacKenzie family and their dairy barn, he casually inserted something I thought quite significant. He mentioned that the foundation for the large building was made up of rocks collected from the property, many from the farm's numerous stone walls. They were painstakingly carried and deposited into a large pit, he said, thus providing this splendid structure with a firm foundation on which to grow. I began to think about that. Put very simply...the foundation for the grand structure came from the farm itself. I suggested to Reverend Scott that this might just be analogous to his own life story. He came from the farm and that is where his faith originated and that faith grew into the institution he chose to embrace successfully for some thirty-eight years as an active Christian minister. His nod and smile over my little theory fell a little short of a ringing endorsement. I got the impression he was happy I found some meaning with this, but his basic humility and modesty prevented him from enthusiastically jumping on board. I understand that, but I am not letting go of my theory any time soon.

I remember Reverend Allen Scott all the way back to when I was a small boy when he would visit our home in times of crisis. I remember as an adult, seeking out his church for my own young family. I remember sitting in that church armed with pen and paper taking notes on his sermons. As I got to know him personally, I found his message from the pulpit was exactly the same as the one that he lived. Life is good...a gift. We are all in this together and people

need to love each other and be thankful for a power outside ourselves that makes the gift possible. “Good news all around,” he would often say. Pretty simple, really.

I saw him switch pulpits with priest and friend, Father Flint, to deliver sermons at the Catholic Church next door and Father Flint was invited to return the gesture. Townspeople noted that Reverend Scott visited all local residents in hospitals and nursing homes, not just those who belonged to his church. That same man was known to marry and bury people who had no church affiliation whatsoever, but found themselves in need of a pastor. Always inclusive and supported by a wonderful wife of 52 years who was ever by his side with her infectious laugh, warm manner and great culinary skills, both the parsonage in Flanders and his ministry proved to be safe havens for any locals in need. Reverend Allen Scott has truly been an institution in the Town of East Lyme for many years and now in retirement continues to preach on occasion, visit old friends and offer help to others where he can, even at the age of ninety-two. He continues to live the same life he has always preached.

Oh, and by the way... one last note regarding those old foundation stones that remained after bulldozers sent that barn crashing to the ground last November. (I can't believe it took them only three hours.) Well, those same stones were reused to make one of the most beautiful New England stone walls I have ever laid my eyes on. You have to drive by and take a look at it.

And to think... those rocks started out as a simple stone wall on farm property, only to become part of a foundation for a significant structure that stood for many years, only then to retire from that role to find themselves again gracing the landscape as a simple stone wall in front of the remaining MacKenzie farmhouse. No sir... The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced. I'm not going to give up on this new theory of mine any time soon!



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