

Rhode Island Yearbook 73

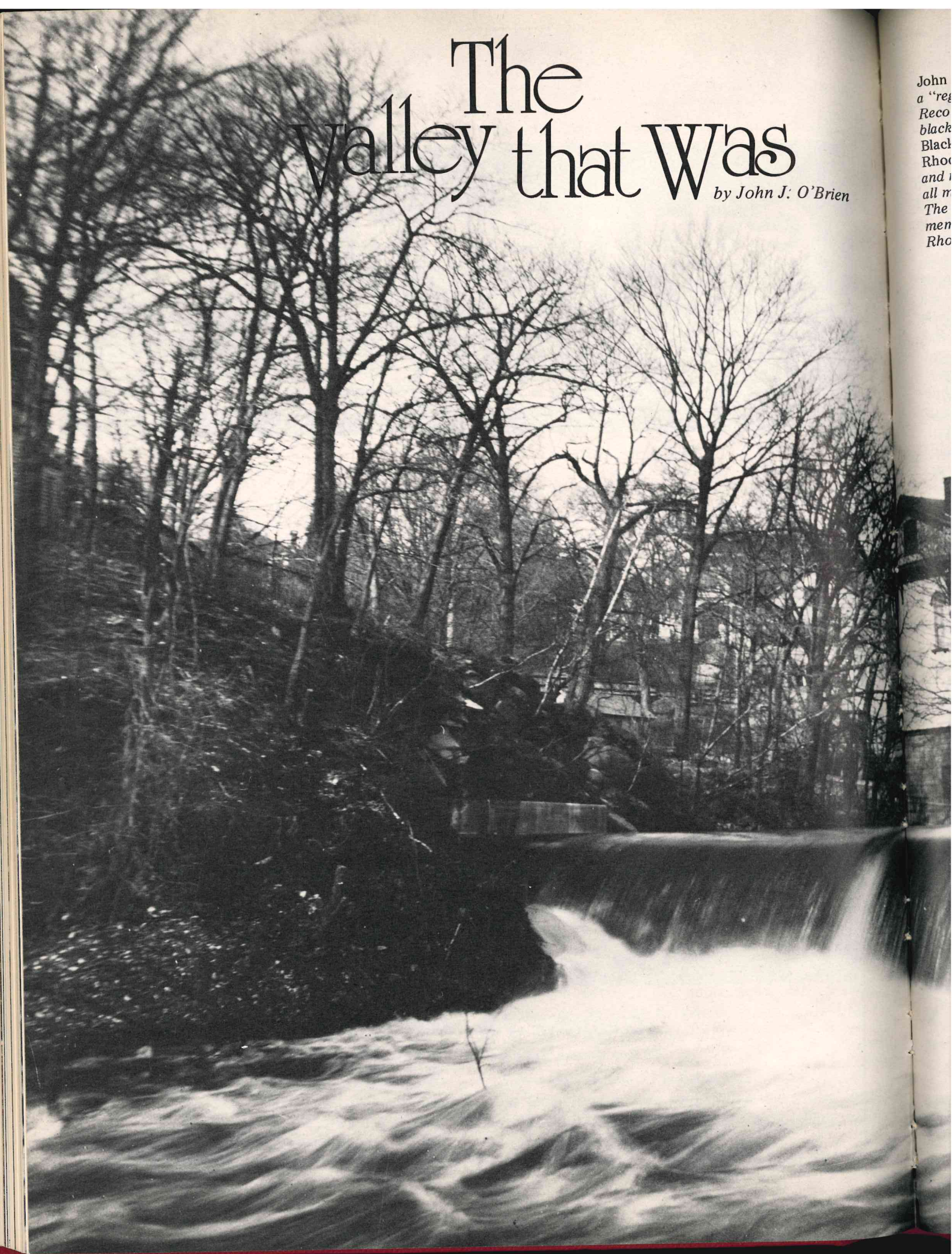
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The Valley that Was

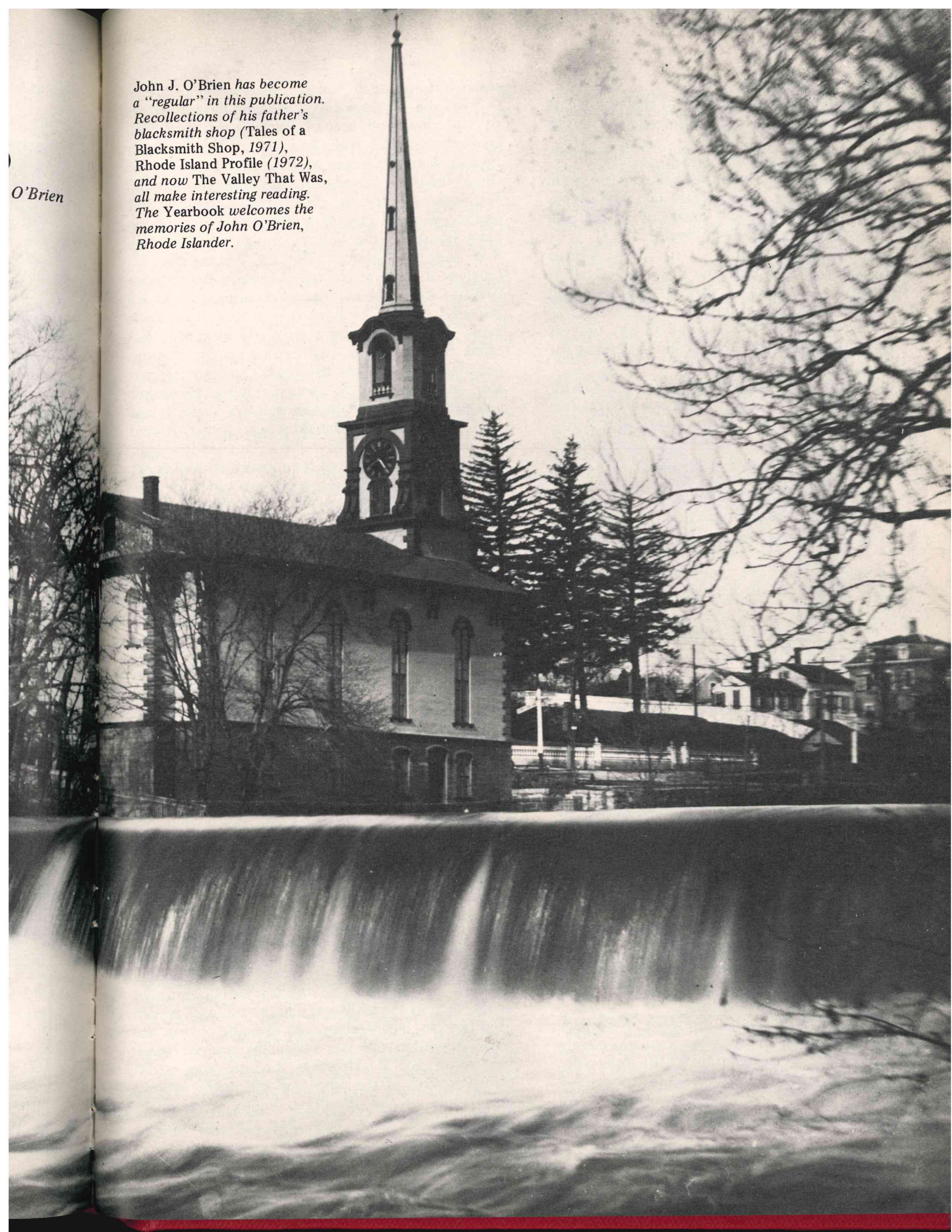
by John J. O'Brien

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John J. O'Brien has become a "regular" in this publication. Recollections of his father's blacksmith shop (Tales of a Blacksmith Shop, 1971), Rhode Island Profile (1972), and now The Valley That Was, all make interesting reading. The Yearbook welcomes the memories of John O'Brien, Rhode Islander.

O'Brien



"John, John, wake up!"

I struggled awake on my side of the bed, as my brother 'Gene's insistent voice intruded upon my comatose state.

"Wha-what's the matter?" I said, sleepily.

"Matter enough, if you didn't bring up the wood and coal last night. It's 6 o'clock and Mother has just gone down to get Pa's breakfast. If the coal and wood aren't up, you're in trouble."

"Oh, that. Don't worry, it's up." and I relaxed as I snuggled down under the bed clothes in our cold bedroom, where the dark of the night still prevailed against the morning light. I still had one blissful hour before I, too, had to get up, eat breakfast, do the morning chores, and get ready for school.

For this, you see, was the beginning of a day for me in the Pawtuxet Valley of sixty or sixty-five years ago. Unlike today, when a turn of a switch on an electric or gas stove gives you instant heat, the fuel for the coal and wood range had to be ready for the housewife's use as she prepared the meals. This job—the chopping of the wood into kindling and pieces to fit our Glenwood range and bringing it to the head of the cellar stairs, together with a scuttle of coal—was a job for the boys of every family in the Valley and one that *had* to be done—as witness the dialogue of my brother and myself.

For the kitchen range provided heat not only for cooking; it also served to give what warmth the house possessed if there was no heating system such as a central furnace to warm our rooms. Many a family in the Valley crowded in the kitchen to get ready for bed or to dress in the morning, and many a Saturday night bath took place in the same place as the mother scrubbed the week's dirt from each protesting child.

People in the Valley in the days of my youth all awoke about the same time, at least in the workingman's family. They usually had to be at work at seven, as they tended the looms in the cotton or woolen mills, worked in the Print Works and Finishing plants, or prepared to serve the public as milkmen, grocerymen, ice-men, or in one of the retail stores. The milkman, of course, was on his way and delivering his milk frequently before sun-up. The clatter of his cans of milk or the noise of his heavy wagon was often all the alarm clock needed.

It was cold, those winter mornings. A furnace that brought heat to the various rooms was merely a sometime thing, possessed only by the well-to-do. The rest of us huddled in our cold bedrooms and scurried to the kitchen as we hurriedly dressed. An occasional space heater, heated by kerosine, helped

some, but not much.

What did we do without in those days, the days of the first and second decades of this 20th century of ours? Well, the case of my family is typical. My family—my mother, my father, and us three children—moved into our new home at 35 Woodside Avenue in 1908. The house was not exactly new. In fact, it was certainly one of the older houses in the Valley; an eight-room cottage that was built about 1790 by William Greene, brother of General Nathaniel Greene. I remember that it contained among other things, when we arrived, a bat on the kitchen wall that objected to being dispossessed and a girl's old bicycle in the cellar. But it had no bathroom, no furnace, no porcelain sink, no electric lights, and no refrigerator. In the rear of the property, it contained that indispensable adjunct to almost every Valley home—a Chic Sale. The cellar floor was of dirt. A coal bin partitioned off under the cellar window held our coal supply. None of the modern conveniences and labor-saving devices we know today did we have—refrigerator, washing machine, modern plumbing, gas or electric stove, electricity, hot water, etc. These were all in the future.

We *did* have something that most people of our class lacked. We had a water supply that came through pipes into our kitchen and which ran by gravity from a spring above Pike's Pond further up the street. Less fortunate people had to depend on wells for their water supply, until a municipal supply was available. In our case, we did not tie into the system until about 1918. My father did install a hot-air furnace and electrify the house about 1915. Hot water was heated on the stove, and an icebox on the porch kept our perishable foodstuffs protected.

But what we didn't have, we never missed. And, in many respects, we led a healthier life than today because we lacked many of the things that we deem necessary today.

Take transportation, for instance. Today, we seldom think of walking to get someplace. Our car is too convenient and walking is too slow. But, in the days of my youth, we all walked to our destination. We walked to school, we walked to work, we walked to church, and we walked—or ran—to play. With the exception of horse-drawn vehicles, the bicycle, and the few public conveyances, such as the trolley-car and the railroad, we all used the two legs God gave us. Because of this, we got our proper exercise, willy-nilly, and we were the better for it. However, because the quick transportation of the auto was still in the future, the people of the Pawtuxet Valley were much more confined to its area than they are today.

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They had to make their own social life, their entertainment, and their religious experiences in the Valley, itself.

Generally speaking, the Pawtuxet Valley is that area in the western and central parts of our State through which runs the Pawtuxet River. From its headwaters in Scituate, the river runs through the mill villages of Hope, Arkwright, Fiskeville, Harris, Phenix, Lippitt, Clyde, and Riverpoint. At Lower Point, it is joined by a branch that flows from Coventry down through Crompton, Anthony, Quidnick, and Arctic Center. Along its banks are the cotton mills, the woolen mills, and the Print Works and Finishing companies whose power it mainly supplied.

The Pawtuxet River in my day was a beautiful river. To a small boy, it was especially a delight. Here, he could fish for eels, pickerel, perch, sunfish, and other small fish—and with some chance of success. He could swim in its waters and play on its shores in the long summer days when school was out. To him, it was a friend and constant joy. Even the adults used the river as a spot for water carnivals, notably one held at Phenix for many years, where Japanese lanterns were hung across the stream at the bridge, floats and canoes were decorated, and tight-rope walkers went their precarious way from one side to the other to the delight and amazement of the natives.

Today, my heart is bitter as I gaze on the Pawtuxet and recall how I knew it as a boy. Wounded and befouled by all the noxious discharges from the mills on its banks, full of debris thrown into it by the thoughtless, it flows sluggishly along on its way to the sea. And I recall, mournfully, how once it was so full of salmon and shad in the springtime that an apprentice carpenter working on the building of Lippitt Mill in 1809 stipulated in his papers that he could not be served fish more than three times weekly. O tempora, O mores!

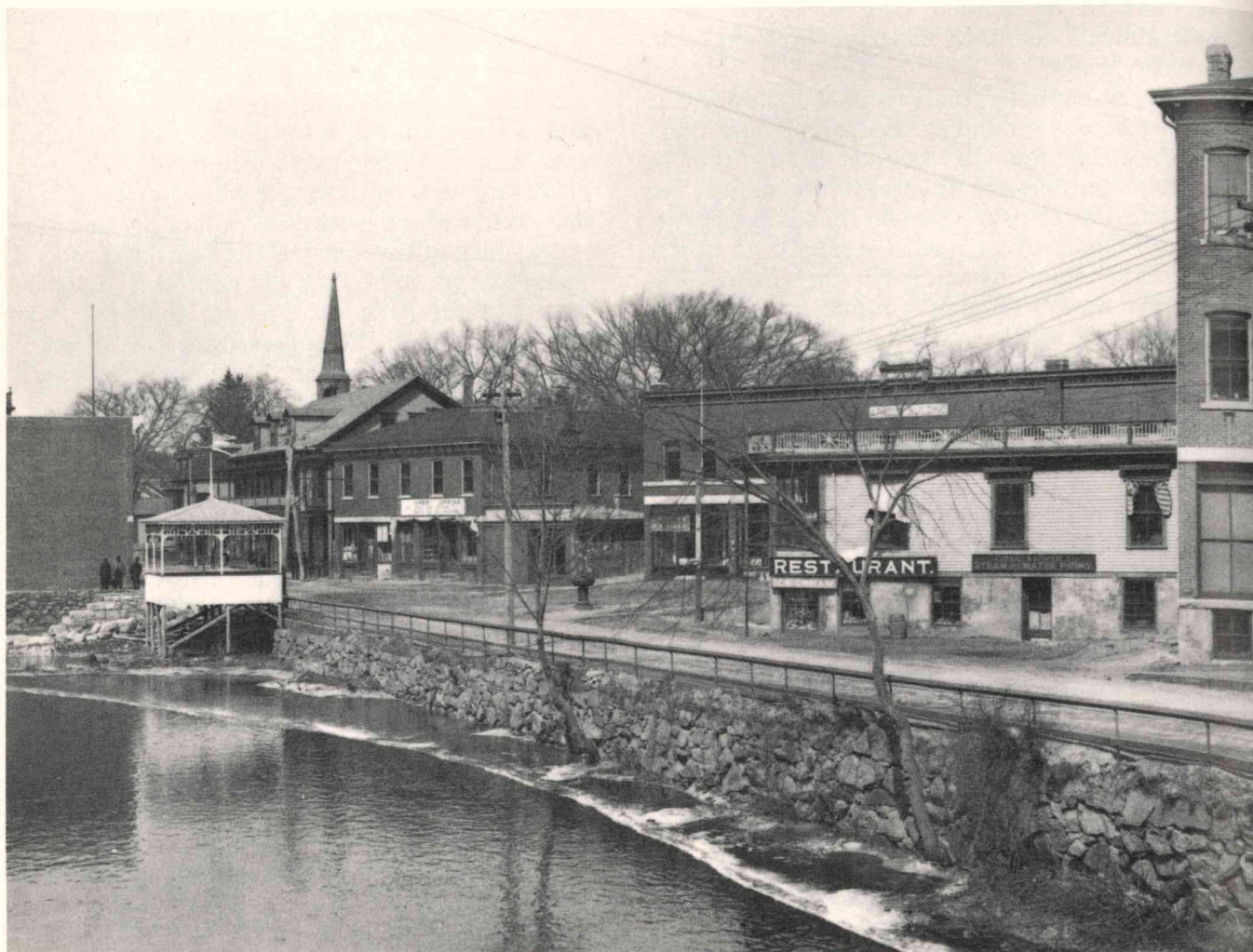
The days of my youth were truly the days of the horse. This noble animal was used by everyone who needed dependable transportation: the farmer, to plow his fields, to work his farm, to deliver his milk and produce; the groceryman, the ice-man, and all the other tradesmen who brought their goods to the consumer; the livery stable owner who rented his horses for pleasure or business and often did the heavy moving jobs of the community; the mills and factories who used it for many jobs; and the few well-to-do people who had their own horses and stable. All these were served by this humble and uncomplaining animal. As the son of a blacksmith, I helped my father to shoe the horses who were brought to him and to keep the

various wagons, carts, and carriages in good repair. A most fascinating place, the blacksmith's shop catered not only to the butcher and baker, but to the doctor, the lawyer, the farmer, the peddler, and all the others who needed the horse. My association with him (even to the mundane task of collecting horse manure for Mrs. McDonald's garden) is one of the most delightful of my memories.

Speaking of the horse recalls how differently the housewife got her foodstuffs and other supplies in my youthful days. In contrast to today, when everyone goes to the supermarket and selects the things needed to eat or to maintain the routine needs of a household, deliverymen came around to your house in the morning to take your order and delivered it to you in the afternoon. Since my father was in business himself, my mother divided her household needs among many tradesmen. Among others I recall, we purchased from three or four grocerymen, including Charles Duke, who owned the Clyde Store and Phenix Market; Kernan Bros.; Carroll Bros.; while Keenan Bros., Jim McCrystal, and the Remington Dairy kept us supplied with milk. L. A. Chaffee delivered ice to fill our icebox—and many a sliver of ice did we get from his cart.

Just a word about the men who called to take orders and make deliveries. They were invariably pleasant and interesting people, whose keen pencils were ever poised over their order pads and whose keener minds suggested to the housewife many things she might have forgotten. But, just as important, perhaps, they brought to her, the housewife, news of the community, little pieces of gossip and information, that were so welcome to relieve the tedium of her somewhat cooped-up day. I remember one of these men, particularly. He was a most charming man named Alphonse Lanois. To him I am indebted for my first collection. He saved for me all his pencil stubs that I carefully saved for some time in an old box. What is valuable to a small boy? Well, many things—and I'll always remember Alphonse for that thoughtful assistance.

Let me recall for your reading what the children of my day did when we were young. We all went to school, of course; all of us to the grammar schools, many of us to high school, and a few to college. Personally, I attended both Phenix Grammar School (where my keenest memory has to do with my failure to pass the first grade and having to repeat), and the Harris Avenue School in Riverpoint. I recall well and affectionately my teachers, even though they were the no-nonsense type who kept strict discipline and whose technique with the rubber strap is still remembered. They taught us well, however, the basics of reading, writing, and



Original photo by W. E. Smith; reprinted by A. Gilman.

arithmetic; and for that I am grateful. We all walked back and forth to school and, regardless of weather, thought nothing of it. And, mind you, the boys at least went barefoot from April to October, feeling the bare earth and being one with Nature.

For recreation, we played marbles, peggy, baseball, football, and similar sports. Pastime Park was the mecca of my group as we played ball after school, when all you needed to make sure you played was a ball and bat. We fished in the ponds within walking distance and we skated on their frozen surfaces or ran "bendies" in the winter. Sliding downhill in the winter, when the snow would stay on the roads much longer than in these days of macadam highways and quick removal, was also a popular pastime. My sister Margaret's Flexible Flyer was the fastest sled on Woodside Avenue, and Jim Murphy's "double-runner" gave many of us a thrilling ride.

Fishing was a sport I avidly pursued. From Pike's Pond (where all the fish were miniature-sized for some reason), Fones' Pond, and the Icehouse

Pond in Blackrock, I brought home numerous fish. In addition, I caught many a large frog, using a bamboo pole and a piece of red flannel for bait, collecting them in a barrel until we had enough for a meal of frogs' legs for my father and myself.

Among other things, the Pawtuxet Valley was an interesting place because of the heterogeneous nature of its residents. While the French-Canadians were most numerous, there were those whose Yankee ancestors went back to Colonial times; the Irish, who settled in many sections in the latter half of the 19th century; the Italians, who settled mostly in Natick; the Swedes of Crompton; the Poles of Quidnick and Anthony; and the Portuguese, who were found mostly in Riverpoint and vicinity. All of these lived fairly amicably together, but many of their racial customs were retained and many a political contest decided on more or less ethnic lines. It never bothered us children, however, whether our playmates were Yankees, French, Polish, or Portuguese—just so long as we liked them and found pleasure in playing with

them.

They don't seem to ring church bells anymore. They did in my day. And their musical sounds on Sunday morning called the Catholics to their various churches all over the Valley, and the Baptists, the Episcopalians, the Methodists, the Congregationalists, and the Lutherans to their services. We all respected each other's religion; but we all had, I know, basic misunderstandings about the other's beliefs that the ecumenical movement of today has done much to dispel. Each sect, I'm sure, had the comfortable feeling that only those of its persuasion would find a seat in Heaven. A glimpse of this feeling is seen in the following anecdote told to me by Bob Wood, to whom I am indebted for the pictures used to illustrate this article (which I took from his fine collection of oldtime pictures of the Valley), and who knows at least as much as I do about the period I'm describing:

While walking along the banks of the Pawtuxet at Phenix, Bob met a man whom he did not know. Being a friendly soul, Bob introduced himself. He found the stranger to be the new minister of the Phenix Baptist Church, who was there at the river to pick an appropriate place for the next baptism of some of his parishioners.

"Why do those you baptize have to be totally immersed?" asked Bob. "Is that really necessary?"

"Yes," said the minister, "it is. Only in that way can you be washed in the blood of the Lamb."

"Well," said Bob, "I'm a Congregationalist and we don't believe that's necessary in order to be washed in the blood of the Lamb."

"Oh," replied the young minister, a bit loftily, "you're not washed. You're just dry-cleaned!"

I might also throw in the fact that my church, Sts. Peter's and Paul's in Phenix, was originally a Baptist church that was purchased by the Catholics. Originally catty-cornered to the street, it was straightened on its foundation to be parallel to the street, no doubt to show the Baptists that we were going in a different direction!

No account of any community, large or small, would be complete without some report on its political activity. The Pawtuxet Valley, because of its many racial strains, was always a hotbed during an election year. The politicking of the candidates was immediate, positive, and personal. Each candidate spoke his piece and gave his views from a platform or a stage or outside, and you could shake his hand or heckle him as you wished. My day was the day when the Republicans were led by John F. Murphy and then by Senator Hebert, while the Democrats found their leaders in Col. P. H. Quinn and Alberic Archambault. I don't remember any of the candidates ever saying a good word about the

other. As an instance of the positive attitude of the voters, themselves, I quote you my father, a life-long Democrat.

"John," he said, "always remember this. If a Democrat becomes a Republican, he's a traitor. On the other hand, if a Republican becomes a Democrat, he's a convert and has seen the light!"

In contrast, Bob Wood recalls being given just three admonitions to guide him through life, by his grandfather Burdick, a Civil War veteran who had fought at Lookout Mountain and followed Sherman from Atlanta to the sea.

"Bob," he said, "always stand up straight, wear your hat squarely on your head, and — ALWAYS VOTE REPUBLICAN!"

In those days, there was no expensive advertising, no radio talks, no television appearances. I can recall listening to William Jennings Bryan as he spoke from Col. Quinn's porch and thrilling to the dynamic presence of Teddy Roosevelt as he campaigned with his Bull Moose part in 1912.

And after each election, you could always join a torchlight party as it paraded its raucous victory march through the town.

Social life in my time was a many-faceted thing. The various mens' clubs were racially or religiously oriented, with the Yankees having their Masonic Orders, the Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias; the Irish and the Italians, the Knights of Columbus; the French with their Cercle LaCordaire and the Frontenac Club; the Poles, their Polish Falcon Club; and the Portuguese, their Holy Ghost Society. All these provided an opportunity to get a night out, to wear the ornate uniform of the order, and generally to have a good time with the boys.

The women, too, had their own clubs, the Daughters of Rebecca, the Daughters of Isabella, and the many church groups, which gave them, as well, an outlet for their enjoyment and a chance to meet regularly with their friends.

Music, too, gave a common outlet to all. The home with a piano and someone to play it was attractive to many young people who sang the songs of the day and made hay with the girl or boy of their choice. Minstral shows and other musical or dramatic shows were held frequently and gave a chance for local talent to be displayed. I remember, with much affection, the enjoyable concerts I listened to at Thornton's Theatre or at the charming little Odean theatre that so often served this purpose. So, too, do I remember listening with pleasure to the Tuesday night band concerts held in Phenix during the summer evenings and given by the Crompton Band, under Harry Marsh, and the Friday night concerts in Arctic Square, as John Powers directed his Quidnick Band.

The movies were, of course, the silent variety; but I can recall back to those fine comedians, John Bunny and Flora Finch, and remember how closely I followed the *Perils of Pauline* or *Gloria's Romance*. Not the least enjoyable features of such movies were the illustrated songs, where you could sing along with the bounding ball, aided by the singing of Tom Dooley and Donat Forcier. Them were the days! Alas, Thornton's Theatre, where I saw many fine travelling shows, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Robin Hood*, and other dramatic musical shows, now lies vacant and unused; while the Gem and the Majestic have suffered a similar fate, I think.

As I have indicated, before the advent of the auto (and I remember the first small Cadillac of Mr. Stoppard's wheezing its way up Woodside Avenue about 1910), most of us stayed in the Valley because, perforce, we couldn't leave. However, there were the trolley and the train to take us away on the few state occasions we could afford it. The trip to Providence on the trolley was most trying to me. It took about an hour over an old roadbed and in a down-at-the-heel car. Subject to motion sickness, I spent most of the time on the rear platform. But we went, my mother and us three children, and visited some of the stores at Christmas time.

About all who used the train regularly on the P.V. Line were the people who worked in the city. So, too, did the people who lived up Arctic and Coventry way—but they took the so-called Willimantic line to carry them in. This was the line I took for four long years as I commuted back and forth to Brown.

The Crompton-Hope trolley was another interesting route. This took you from one end of the Valley to another, making many trips in the course of a day. The cars were smaller and the roadbed just as rocky, but it would get you there and back. In the summer, when they used the "bloomers," I often wondered how the poor conductor collected his fares as he poised precariously on the running board.

Of all the things I remember, the athletic activity in the Valley stands out most strongly, perhaps. Being pretty much prisoners confined to our own small area of the State, each village used up its surplus energy by vying with each other for athletic supremacy in such sports as baseball, football, running, and others. Such contests were most fiercely contested.

In baseball, I followed the fortunes of the High School team as it played at Pastime Park, and greatly admired such stalwarts as the Hudson brothers, Roy, Allie, and Wilton, that graceful

catcher, Steve Latowski, who went on to play in the majors, and many others. The old Clyde Grays were a bit before my time, but they played a good brand of ball and counted among their players the great Hughie Duffy, whose mark of .432 still stands as the highest batting average ever made in the major leagues. On a team contemporary with my time, such players as Pete Boyle (who once lost a foot race to Jim Thorpe), Mattie Carley, the McGuire brothers—Jim, Joe, and Arthur, Charlie Thereault, Phil Agnew, and Dan O'Rourke played exciting ball. Crompton always had a good team, with such greats as Pete Nolan, Ivor Swanson, and Charlie Cummiskey seeing to it that Crompton won its share.

But the one, I think, who brought baseball to its greatest heights in my day was Sam Marsocci, the fiery manager of the Natick Hustlers. He hated to lose and would go to any length to prevent it. Always in the fall there would be a "little World Series" between Natick and Crompton, where both managers would import big league players under assumed names, to insure the victory.

Football and the games between the Valley teams linger in my memory. Here, I think of the games I saw between Crompton and Natick, Crompton and Interlaken, or Riverpoint and Apponaug. I think of such players as Frank "Sheriff" O'Neil and Pete Nolan, who played for Crompton; Jack Holmes, Frank McCarthy, the Driscoll brothers, Thad and Tom, Donald Pike and Kenny Post of the Riverpoint Athletics, and many other fine players. They weren't paid much, if at all, but they played for keeps. Frank McCarthy, a friend of long standing, and a left tackle on the Riverpoint team, tells me that the game between Riverpoint and Natick "always ended in a fight."

A special mention goes to Mike DiCiantis, who played end for Riverpoint and who made up with a fiery spirit for his lack of weight.

At the end of the season, as in baseball, climactic games were played on Thanksgiving Day. College players were imported and we had the chance to see such noted players as Sprackling and Jimmy Jemal of Brown. They earned their money.

Running, too, had its day. A modified marathon on the Fourth of July usually resulted in a victory for Tom Fitzsimmons, who came from Phenix or Hope, with Frank Smith as his keenest rival. In the shorter races, Skinney Lamont of Phenix was usually home first.

Yes, the Valley of my day was a fine place to grow up in. It lacked many of the luxuries we have today; but life, I think, was much less complicated, with much less problems. The kids in the Valley, today, are not so close to nature as we were—and

this is a shame. Gone forever is the thrill of awakening with the first frost of autumn and gathering the chestnuts that fell from their shells as the frost cracked them open. Very seldom now is the challenging crow of the rooster heard to waken you at dawn. Gone, too, are many of the ponds I used to fish and many of the open fields in which we played. Pastime Park is no more but, like many another field, has been filled in by the buildings of man. The lovely home on Main Street where I played with the Greene boys is now replaced by a high-rise apartment house that rears up gauntly against the sky.

"But" Knight's old livery stable has been replaced by an automatic laundry, and Clyde Square shows two empty corners where once the Clyde Hotel of "Buxter" McMahon assuaged the thirst of many a regular and the Flanagan building housed Jimmy Duffy's barbershop, John Flanagan's sa-

loon, and Joseph Flanagan's dry goods store. All, all are gone; the old familiar places! And my heart saddens as I note that the Odean theatre in its old age stands as merely a warehouse for furniture. Change is necessary, I know; but it is not always for the better.

Is the Pawtuxet Valley of today a better place to live and grow up in than in my day? As I ride through its streets and note the physical changes, I ponder over this. Personally, I don't think it is; but then, the days of your youth are your joyous days and, as your years "dwindle down to a precious few", I know your memories sometimes grow more rosy than the realities ever were. Anyway, *my* Valley was a fine place in which to live. No matter how it changes, it will always have my heart. I hope that those of you living there today will feel so, too.

Photo by Kershaw

