Hamlet of Heathens

On a cloudless late October day with Jody behind the wheel, GMF's battered 1994 F-250 truck slowly and bumpily made its way down Old Meekertown Road, Ralph and I squeezed onto the bench seat between the door and stick shift. We'd arrived by way of State Route 272 and Estey and Meekertown Roads. They were properly paved streets, but Old Meekertown was little more than a two-wheel-rut track. Brush swept the sides, and at one point Jody had to get out to chainsaw a tree fallen across the road.

Sun streaming through the forest ignited the hardwoods. Tawny and bronzed oaks, hickories and beech infused the atmosphere with a golden aura, while sumacs and sugar maples threw of shards of red and orange. We stopped at a grassy spot where the road faded to a narrow trail and continued on foot. The path was paved with fallen leaves, in some places creating intricate patterns of color and shape, like a bright tile floor. In a swampy area, the path became a narrow corridor between tall, plumed phragmites.

Along the way, several burls bulged from tree trunks and limbs. Rounded, knobby outgrowths, they're likely caused by an injury or infection. They give trees a distinctive personality, sometimes forming unusual shapes. Highly prized by woodworkers like Jody for their contorted, swirling grain, naturalist Donald Culross Peattie saw "contour maps of mountainous country . . . displays of the aurora borealis . . . a dark riffling tide-sweeping over clear white sands." Ralph and I occasionally teased Jody that he knew and had named every burl in GMF. Sighting a particularly large one high on a yellow birch trunk, it suggested an image. "Snapping turtle," Ralph shouted. "Sleeping dog," Jody countered. Round-robin we went, the visions growing ever more ridiculous until we dissolved into laughter.

In short order, we reached Townhouse Rock, a huge lichen and moss festooned glacial boulder with a sheer face to the path and an overall saltbox shape. A 1984 newspaper article quoted Darrell Russ saying it was “Big as a little house.” Denizens of Meekertown supposedly gathered here to debate public issues and settle disputes. The layout of roads was said to be a favorite order of business, usually the decision rescinded by a vote the next day. Regardless of the discussion or the state of parliamentary procedure, a random drop by the glacier had created a kind of pulpit, place of human consequence, a relationship between geology and people.

Jody walked back to the truck as Ralph and I continued on foot down Old Meekertown Road. The road was laid out in 1792 and once connected what is now State Route 272 in Norfolk with Route 63 in Canaan’s Hollenbeck valley. Meekertown stood on either side of the road’s midsection. Phineas Meeker was an early area landowner, having purchased a 50-acre lot in 1757. He never lived there, his interest being in stands of hemlock and black spruce. Why his name became associated with this part of South Norfolk is a mystery.

Today, Meekertown is a Norfolk ghost village in the south of GMF near the Canaan line. There are several obscure cellar holes in the woods and a small cemetery, but the short-lived community has cast a long shadow of remembrance due to remarks of Deacon Noah Miner, who probably more than anyone wanted the place forgotten. According to Theron Crissey’s 1900 history of the town, eighty years earlier Miner called the settlement a “hamlet of heathens, living in intellectual, moral and spiritual darkness,” recommending that the Norfolk Congregational Church undertake missionary work.

The path led through mixed hardwoods and pockets of hemlock, last night’s rain still clinging to leaves and needles in the cool valley, causing them to shimmer in broken sunlight. The way narrowed, faded, and disappeared as we passed through another brightly lit, phragmites-

dominated swamp, reconnecting to the road by working through the wetland and crossing a boisterous, rock-strewn brook.

On a slight slope, Ralph pointed to a group of small aluminum rings on the ground, remains of an old experiment by Charlie Canham testing the effects of keeping mice away from tree seedlings. We passed a picturesque open-water wetland dotted with tufts of sedge, edged by blueberry bushes with autumn reddened leaves, then crossed a stream on an old plank bridge.

Asters flowered along the road, and in the woods among mossy boulders whose shapes reminded us of sleeping animals. Colliers came here around 1840, many of them Swiss, hired by iron companies to meet the growing hunger for fuel to feed their furnaces. “They were a hard lot, strong, fearless and not inclined to obey any laws, but their own,” mid-twentieth century land surveyor Clarence H. Nickerson said to the Torrington Register in 1944, having talked with an old-time collier who lived to 92. Nickerson knew these woods well, having spent much time roaming around Meekertown peering through a transit for Ted Childs.

Just where these roughhewn men lived is uncertain. They built cheap shanties, according to Nickerson, “made no doubt from the remains of the trees after the charcoal wood had been prepared. None of the houses they erected were even of a semi-permanent type.” To the extent there were cellars, they weren’t “much bigger than, say, than an automobile,” Darrell Russ told a reporter in 1984, and called them “squatters’ holes.” They didn’t own land, didn’t pay taxes. Crissey called Meekertown “quite a settlement,” but Russ disagreed. “They must have lived extremely simply; it was no great life.”

Half of Norfolk’s people didn’t know “there was such a place within its borders,” Crissey quotes an unnamed source. Meekertown remains a singular curiosity, but it’s more widely known in the twenty-first century given our fascination with oddities. A local brewery even

produces a beer called “Hamlet of Heathens,” made with wild Meekertown hops “to entice the inner Meekertown in all of us.”

Deacon Miner, a man of great energy and an ardent Christian, lived nearby on Blackland Road. He vociferously complained to Norfolk selectmen that Meerkertowners stole his chickens and cattle, among other depredations. About 1820 or 1821, Crissey reports, E. Lyman Gaylord and a companion rode through Meekertown on horseback “and from what we saw we concluded that Deacon Miner’s report was not overstated.”

The predations of Meekertowners might not seem surprising for a place “dominated by colliers, loggers, and various shiftless characters of similarly disreputable vocations,” as Herbert Winer put it in his 1955 Yale doctoral dissertation. Some residents may have worked at Cornelius Brown’s nearby sawmill on Meekertown (now Brown) Brook, Norfolk’s first. No doubt, the community had an outsized reputation given that it may never have had more than around a dozen families, and by some accounts had vanished by the Civil War. But the pernicious reputation of colliers and other forest dwellers in Meekertown and beyond persisted, deserved or not. You could “rake hell with a fine-tooth comb, search the slums with a microscope, go through the jails with a scoop-net, and you couldn’t find another such crowd as . . . from the mountain,” Winer quotes a pillar of the Canaan community in 1858.

With their tattered clothes and coarse manners, colliers may have had the worst reputation of all people living on the mountain. Making Charcoal was poor man’s bull work—hard, tedious and filthy. It kept men away from family and community for weeks at a time, leaving them disconnected from the rest of the world. They were outsiders, looked upon as half wild by farmers and townspeople who went to church and adhered to societal norms. To their credit, colliers were woods-wise with a unique understanding of the landscape. Charcoal making

was an art, and experienced colliers had a sixth sense about wood and fire in a mound. Producing the purest carbon fuel that made the highest quality iron, their grunt-work made other men rich, perhaps stirring resentment that may have led to lawlessness.

All we heard was birdsong and not a crew of unkempt, coal-blackened men. The distant stories of Meekertown seemed no more than fables. But, just after crossing swollen Brown Brook on its circuitous way through swamps and ponds, I looked north toward the silent, permanent residents of Meekertown.

"Beyond this brushy wetland," I said to Ralph, "beside the tall pines on that knoll, is Meekertown Cemetery. No one knows how many people are buried, but three anonymous graves are marked. Jody took me there a couple years ago."

On that day, we scrambled down the embankment into a lowland with lots of beaver-chewed stumps. We crossed Brown Brook near an arched dam of tangled sticks, where Jody once trapped a 75-pound beaver. A quick climb, and we were atop the knoll overlooking a swamp with mirrored water that held a slice of sky edged in a riot of reflected vegetation. At one end was the conical hump of a beaver lodge. Old timers, Jody said, believed that a mud-topped lodge predicted an open, cold winter. This one was covered in bare sticks, presaging lots of snow.

Ferns grew around three graves sheltered by trees and marked with rough fieldstones bearing no inscription. Two had footstones, one only a headstone. Footstones were uncommon after 1850, suggesting the age of the interments.

"Could be a hard-luck farm family or colliers," Jody said. "The one with head and footstone so close is probably a child's grave."

"Maybe the burial right next to it was the mother, both lost in childbirth," I suggested.

Jody shrugged. “We’ll never know. There was a lot of that back then. And there’s an old cellar hole only about 300 feet away. A grieving husband and father might have wanted to bury his wife and baby close to home.”

Few people know of this burial ground and fewer still have been there. Rarely, a descendant of someone who once lived in the area will make an inquiry. Seeking the grave of Cornelius Brown, his sawmiller ancestor, Loyal B. Clark wrote to Ted Childs in 1954 looking for directions. There have long been rumors of another, larger graveyard in Meekertown, but even meticulous surveyor Nickerson could not find it.

We stood silently, light dim under the thick canopy of leaves, and looked out into the expansive light of the swamp. This was a sacred space, consecrated by those long ago forgotten. We show our respect by quietly keeping the stories alive, as best we can. It was a moment to be absorbed and harvested in leaner spiritual times.

In our quiet, we heard chickadees flit through the pines and swamp brush, their sweet, rhythmic *dee-dee-dee* echoing around us. More birds flew in as we stood there.

“My father used to call them to his outstretched finger,” Jody said, taking a deep breath. “They were his favorite bird.” Quiet stole over us again. It seemed one of those moments when we are joined by presences beyond our understanding.

Years in the future, Ralph and I continued down Old Meekertown Road past egg-shaped Wampee Pond, a swampy area dammed into a waterbody by Walcott and Childs in the late 1930s for waterfowl propagation and fire protection. In GMF lore, Wampee is a Native American word for “wild duck corn,” but has also been rendered “clear water” in a place names book published by the Connecticut Historical Society. At roadside, the pond is partially edged in grassy tussocks and a palisade of phragmites. The dark water flickered with silver as a stiff

breeze riffled the surface. The hillside behind it was bright with reds and yellows, though green still dominated.

"You made it!" Jody exclaimed with a laugh, leaning against the F-250, parked just past the pond. He'd arrived via roads from the other direction.

We got in the truck and took the Chattleton Road to Meekertown Camp, passing Hill's Corners, once home to a Mr. Hills, where a few small cellar holes hide among the trees. Only maps echo his time here. Nothing else is known about him.

We stopped briefly at the somewhat conical Iron Stone, a rock about three-or-four-feet tall standing prominently at roadside. On this day, dusted with sun and bright leaves, it hardly seemed out of the ordinary. Supposedly, its name has been earned by repeated lightning strikes, suggesting high iron content to some.

Located on the site of the Wilm farm barn, Meekertown Cabin is a gabled, vertically sided structure of weathered boards with a green metal roof that extends to form a porch along the eaves. Built at the direction of Ted Childs, it sits in a grassy clearing surrounded by tall trees. The interior features a stone fireplace and narrow, winding staircase that came out of the house that once stood nearby. Boy Scouts have used the cabin for generations, and the beams, posts, and walls are inscribed with names, dates, and symbols of those who have spent the night.

Christian Wilm acquired a farm and forestland here after the Civil War. "He worked hard and earned little," Nickerson wrote. Woodchoppers employed by nearby sawmills boarded at the farmhouse "and there was much merriment at the farm weekends." Although they remain unrecorded, Nickerson notes that "some lively stories are told of the escapades that took place in the 'old house,'" torn down in 1938. It's said that Mrs. Wilms spent some of her final days in

court for having shot her Swedish hired man in the back. She claimed that he tried to attack her, but the man argued that he was just trying to collect back wages.

Ralph, Jody and I pulled up some log chunks that serve as stools, and sat around the fire ring in front of the cabin. A pile of coals testified to the spot's long use. A fat porcupine slept on a high branch above us.

Over lunch, we exchanged stories with enough laughter to scare any bears wandering the neighborhood. But Meerkertown's ghosts are never frightened. Their tales linger. Honoring their presence, Jody shared the story of Charles and Sarah Dean, an elderly couple who lived in a small house a short walk west. "It's a sad yarn," he said, "but deserves telling and retelling so it won't be forgotten.

"I'm aware of several versions, but a marble headstone in Lower City Cemetery on the west side of the mountain is inscribed with the only hard facts I know," he said taking a deep breath. "Charles Dean, 100 years old, and his wife Sarah, 90, both died on Christmas eve 1848.

"Heavy rain fell on an unusually warm day, melting snow and ice in Brown Brook, creating thick fog. Water cascaded from the eaves of their home, and drops tapped on the roof from overhanging tree branches. With springlike temperatures, the couple banked their fire and went to sleep. A fierce wind arose, heralding a rapid change in weather. The thermometer plunged, flash froze dripping water, almost instantly turning puddles to ice. Awakened by the creak and groan of tall frozen trees, and the biting cold that gripped the house, Sarah went to the hearth and tried striking a fire with matches stored beside it.

"On Christmas, a bypasser thought it odd that no smoke spiraled up from the couple's chimney. He went to check. Sarah was found frozen, kneeling as if about to light the fire,

unspent matches strewn around her. The rain had found a leak in the roof and ruined them. Her husband Charles was discovered frozen under covers in bed.

"It's rumored that Charles had been one of 30,000 Hessian soldiers hired by the British to fight in the Revolution. One of 4,000 British and Hessian soldiers captured at Saratoga, he was among those marched through town in November 1778 on their way to Charlottesville, Virginia, camping on the Norfolk Green. That night, a Hessian prisoner escaped. Legend has it that he changed his name to Charles Dean, married a local farmer's daughter, and settled down—for another 70 years."