WABAN IN THE 1930s and 1940s

I was born the day after Christmas in 1928. The following month my father and grandmother bought the property at 41 Annawan Road in Waban. According to the City Assessor's records, the house was built - or perhaps completed - in 1930. In any event, I lived there until 1950. When I was quite young, our house was the last building on the right, going down Annawan towards Quinobequin, and the road was still a "private way," unpaved as far as the lower end of our property. Strangely enough, the rest of the road, from our house all the way to Quinobequin, was paved and had been "accepted" by the City. Across the road was #42 and just below it, # 52. There were no other houses on Annawan Road at that time. On Gould Road there were but two houses, both on the east side - #12 and #18. Below #18, Gould Rd. was also unpaved. Edgefield Road, which we kids called the "mountainside road," was barely passable for vehicles. It was ungraded dirt, full of potholes and ruts. The "mountains' were overgrown mounds of dirt on the river side of the road.

The fields between Annawan and Gould were clear enough that some farmer cut hay there every summer. He would leave his horse-drawn rake overnight, ands we kids would sit on the iron seat and pretend to be driving the horse. Periodically there would be a fire in the fields and we would rush down to watch the firemen put it out. No one ever admitted to starting these fires, but certainly some of them were deliberate.

In the 1930s a builder, Charles D. Train, began to change Waban dramatically. He built houses all around the town, and he was responsible for many that now line Annawan and Gould Roads. He also built the addition to our house, a full dormer on the back that added two bedrooms on a third floor. My father sold the house in 1975, and I often wonder if recent owners have had any idea that that third floor is an addition.

On page 218 of the first edition of *Waban - Early Days* begins a history of the Improvement Society, written by Newton C. Burnett. The Burnetts lived in one of those "new" houses just down the street from us (75 Annawan). Newton Jr. was my age and my best buddy in Angier and later, at Weeks Junior High. His grandparents lived at 133 Waban Avenue, and his grandmother, Mrs. Archie Burnett, is mentioned a couple of times in Early Days. His father was president of the Improvement Society in 1942-43, and their next-door neighbor, Thomas Shirley (67 Annawan) succeeded him for 1943-44. As the houses went up, our woods and fields began to disappear.

There were several milk companies which delivered milk daily. Hood's, Whiting's, Buxbaum's and Noble's are some that I can remember. They had horse-drawn wagons until the late 30s. I believe the Hood's man was the first to get a truck, and the others were quick to follow.

We attended Angier School, of course, and I don't seem to have any particularly interesting memories of my time there. I do know that I had a screaming fit when my mother tried to leave me on my first day of kindergarten. I must have gotten over it, because I finished kindergarten and went into Grade 1 rather than the interim grade they called "pre-primary." I've often wondered about that, because I was only 4 years 9 months old when I entered kindergarten, and I have to assume that age was not a determining factor. Mr. Carleton Ray was our principal, and I think we all liked him. His

daughter Carol was in some of my classes, too. My sixth grade teacher, Mr. Jim Peebles, I can remember because I still have a class picture which includes him, taken in 1940. It has been posted on the WIS website, too. Mr. George Francis, the janitor, was a friend to all the kids. He yelled at us a lot and we all loved him. The driveway was a half circle in front of the school, and when coal was delivered for the furnace, Mr. Francis would open a manhole cover and the coal truck would put a chute there and dump in the coal down below the surface to the boiler room level. We loved to watch. It was delightfully noisy, too.

We had two police officers who did crossing duty on Beacon Street. One was Clem Barry; the other was George Tobin. My brother always called George “Jake” for some reason. They knew all of us by name and were always ready to help.

In the school auditorium, now long gone, there was a motto high above the stage. I believe it read “Education is the Safeguard of Order and Liberty.” In the lowest grades we could read the words “is,” “the,” “of,“ and “and.” As we progressed upwards through the grades, the rest of the words gradually became intelligible. The auditorium, which we called the assembly hall, is now the school library.

On May 6, 1937 the dirigible “Hindenburg” passed over the school on its last flight. We all went out on the front lawn to watch. Little did we know the fate awaiting it at Lakehurst, New Jersey, later that day.

The tennis courts were often flooded in the winter, and when the water froze, we made the most of that. Usually we broke through the ice, soaked our feet, and, as boys will do, pushed each other down. When recess was over there would be a long line of boys sitting on the radiators, boots lined up under them. Until sometime in Grade 6, we boys all wore knickers - not to be confused with the British “knickers,” which are something else entirely. Strangely these suddenly disappeared around 1940, and we all began to wear long trousers. I’ve often wondered how these events come about. And what happened to the knicker inventory in clothing stores. Blue jeans were not allowed in school until perhaps the 60s. I’m not sure, but I know we were never allowed to wear them to school. In junior and senior high school, we wore what one might call “dress” trousers and shirt, and either a nice sweater or a sport coat, often with tie.

Waban Square today is little different from what it was half a century ago. Of course, the stores have different proprietors and functions, but the physical appearance is virtually unchanged. Kouzina's restaurant used to be Rhodes’ Pharmacy. Manned by Mr. Rhodes and “Win,” it was the place to go for ice cream cones, popsicles, and film for our cameras. They did sell pharmaceutical supplies, too, of course. Beside it was a bakery, I think. And next to that, Guy L. Harvey Hardware, which still operates, under the name Waban Hardware. I stopped in there on my first visit in 35 years and found someone who remembered my Angier classmate, Eddie VerPlanck, who worked there. Eddie’s dad had also been a president of the Improvement Society, by the way. The shoe repair shop, down below street level, was there and is still there! The variety store, which changed hands many times, was a favorite place for kids. Magazines, and especially comic books,

were popular, as was the candy counter. In those days you could still buy penny candy. Regular candy bars, Coke, and Pepsi sold for a nickel. This store was, at various times, called Coulter's, Ide's, and, about the time I left Waban, CB's Waban News. I'm sure there were other names, too. Then there was Mrs. Paddock's yarn and gift shop. It was not an interesting place for kids. She did not welcome children. And between her shop and the bank on the corner was Tony's barber shop. The store on the corner of Windsor Rd and Beacon Street, which in Ms. Hearn's watercolor print, is shown as Martin's Cleaners, was in the 30s and 40s, the Newton Trust Company, later the Newton-Waltham Trust. It moved to a new building on Wyman Street later, as I recall. Around the corner on Windsor Road was a small food store (Waban Market), a Chinese laundry, and the last two stores were the A & P grocery and the First National grocery, both chain stores.

These were the last stores on Windsor Road. My parents always shopped at the A&P and never at First National. I never knew why. Behind the block was one far corner of the BraeBurn golf course. There was a gazebo of sorts out there, and I heard that some naughty activities may have occurred in it. At least that was the rumor in those days. Down on Wyman Street there was, at one time, an ice cream parlor about where Starbuck's is today, but I believe the old Waban Hall was still there, now hidden by new construction. Louis' barber shop was on the corner, and the post office was around the corner. I remember when the new (current) post office was built in the 1940s. Waban Wine and Liquor came into existence about the time I left Waban in the 50s, but I do remember it. .

Mr. H.H. Richardson's charming little station was demolished when the MBTA took over the railroad line, but it was a reasonably busy place when the Boston and Albany Railroad ran commuter trains between Riverside and Boston. These were little coal burners, and if the windows were open, passengers were treated to fumes and coal dust. My father rode the train daily to Boston, and later, when I was assigned temporary duty at the South Boston Naval Annex in late 1950, I too rode this little huffy-puffy railroad for about a month. The MBTA began operations in 1958.

In the triangle formed by the intersection of Woodward Street and Pine Ridge Road was a bad-tempered dentist, He didn't believe in Novocain and growled at us if we complained while he was working. I omit his name in deference to any living descendants.

Behind St. Philip Neri Church was the Boston Market Garden, where we could go to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. I remember being confused whenever my mother said she was going to the Boston Garden, because I had been taken to Boston to the circus, and it was held in Boston Garden, now the TD Banknorth Garden. So many Boston Gardens!

The Windsor Club was called the Waban Neighborhood Club in those days. My parents were members and spent much of their social life at Club activities. My father was in the bowling league, and my mother did a variety of things, including acting in some of the plays. The bowling was played with "Boston" pins. They were basically the same as candlepins, except that the deadwood had to be cleared after every ball. This was before pin-setting machines were installed. My first job was as a pin boy. We would sit at the

end of the alley and jump down to clear pins after each ball. After a frame, we had to reset all the pins by hand.

Mr. Champagne held dancing classes for kids at the Club once a week. After school we would go home, put on our "Sunday School" suits and ties, complete with white gloves, and go to the Club for our lessons. We professed to hate it, but actually we generally had a pretty good time. Mrs. Champagne assisted in those lessons, and we boys thought she was quite attractive.

Membership in the Club then was rather limited, or perhaps I should say, "restricted." In those days there was a lot of racial and religious discrimination. In spite of a fairly sizable Jewish population mostly in the area near where the Zervas school is today, I don't think there were any Jewish members at the time. There were, so far as I can remember, no African-Americans or Asians living in Waban (excluding the Chinese laundry). Waban was pretty much "WASP" country then, and I suppose the Club reflected this attitude. Fortunately changes started after World War 2, and today I'm happy to say that people of any and all backgrounds can and do live in Waban - if they can afford it! As a child I never thought about the fact that I was among the privileged few whose families could afford to live in a somewhat snobbish area. People who lived in some other parts of Newton were of a different "class." They were relatively recent immigrants or children of immigrants. They worked mostly at low level jobs. Many still spoke their native language.

We as children never recognized our bigotry. We stayed mostly in Waban, associated with our "own kind," and paid little attention to the problems of others. The Great Depression passed almost unnoticed in Waban. It wasn't until I went to Weeks Junior High and Newton High School that I realized that there were other people in the world. I became acquainted with and friends of kids of Italian, Irish, Jewish, Catholic backgrounds. Later in life, long after my parents had died, I discovered that my great grandfather was an Irish Catholic immigrant to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and that he had eight children. Somehow, knowing that makes me feel better. So much for the WASPs! I learned to skate on Dresser Pond, down on Quinobequin Road at the site of the old Dresser home. It was very popular, and whoever owned the property didn't seem to mind. We also skated at Crystal Lake in Newton Centre. The City sold season skating privileges for 25 cents, good at both Crystal Lake and Bullough's Pond. The ice house on Crystal Lake burned down in 1939. By then most people had refrigerators, so the ice business was rapidly disappearing. There was also the availability of winter memberships at BraeBurn Country Club. These entitled the member to unlimited skiing and skating there. But in contrast to the City's 25 cents, BraeBurn wanted 25 dollars.

On Beacon Street, near the present Cold Spring Park, there was a City dump and Kerrigan's Texaco Station. A little beyond, at the Beacon-Walnut crossroads, there was a gas station on each corner. On the west (Waban) side of Walnut Street, there was a Socony (now Exxon-Mobil) station on the right and a Shell on the left. On the east side, there was an Amoco on the left and a Jenney on the right. (All as you headed towards Newton Centre on Beacon Street) I suppose this is really part of Newton Centre, but these

were the nearest garages for many Wabanites. Those who lived at the other end of town could find stations in Lower Falls. As kids we used to ride down Quinobequin Road to Washington Street, and then to the first gas station. There we would pump up our bike tires, whether they needed it or not. The station attendant never objected. Back then the highway which today is 128/I 95 did not exist. There was a Rte. 128, but it passed through Newton mostly along Walnut Street - from Needham to the south and Waltham to the north. When the present 128 was constructed in the 50s, we thought it was a modern marvel. Maybe it is. Ask those who drive it daily for their opinion.

I was about 3 weeks shy of my 13th birthday when the Pearl Harbor attack occurred. Our first thought was "Where is Pearl Harbor?" Once we got that settled, we decided it might take a couple of weeks to defeat the Japanese. The bitter truth came to us as the days passed. We weren't going to win this one very quickly. I remember one day at Weeks Junior High when we were told to get our coats and prepare to leave. Since this was well before the usual 2:30 dismissal time, we wondered what was happening. Nobody knew.

At home I found my mother had packed some clothing and other odds and ends. She said there were rumors that Nazi bombers were headed our way, and we might have to leave. As it turned out there were no planes, and the scare ended rather quickly. We probably should have known that the Germans had no intercontinental bombers anyway. This never happened again, but we soon learned that war meant more than just soldiers and guns. We were required to black out our windows every night. Cars had to have the upper half of their headlights covered with an opaque material. Most people used black electric tape. These precautions were intended to darken the shoreline so that Allied ships would not be silhouetted and thus easily visible to German submarines. Although it did help, there were many instances of ships attacked and sunk right off our shores. People who lived on the coast itself were subject to even more stringent regulations. The blackouts didn't end until 1945.

But while hostilities continued, people at home pitched in to help the "war effort." Men at home became Air Raid Wardens or had other positions in the Civil Defense organization. Women became Nurses' Aides, Gray Ladies, and similar useful jobs. My father, as an Air Raid Warden, had a white World War 1 -style helmet with the CD insignia on the front. As a Boy Scout I was allowed to be a "messenger," taking messages from here to there and back. (All this, of course, predates cell phones and walkie-talkies.) Actually what I really wanted to do was wear that helmet. Periodically an alert would be sounded, and all the Civil Defense people would report to their assigned locations. Our spot, I think, was at the intersection of Annawan Road and Waban Avenue.

We collected scrap metal and rubber in great quantities. I remember a long pile of old metal beside Beacon Street somewhere near Upland Road. Trucks would come by periodically and pick up this scrap, which was then melted down and reused. We bought War Stamps at school and filled little books. When a book was full, we exchanged it for a War Bond. You could get a bond for $18.75, and after 10 years, it could be cashed in for $25.00. Bond-selling was big business during the war. If you have read the book or have

seen the movie “Flags of Our Fathers,” you will recall that three of the Iwo Jima flag-raisers were sent on bond-selling tours.

Food, gasoline, tires, fuel oil, some clothing, and other items were rationed. I think we had an “A” sticker on our car, which entitled us to 3 gallons of gas per week. Tires were almost impossible to get. Because of the limitations of fuel oil, we closed off portions of our house and used the fireplace. We burned cannel coal, which came in big blocks about a foot square. It wasn‘t easy to get these burning, but once we did, they gave off pretty decent amounts of heat. We all sat in our living room and listened to the radio. (No TV in those days)

“Victory Gardens” were encouraged to help our food supply. Several families in our neighborhood planted in an area which covered what is today a couple of house lots - 106 Annawan and 57 Edgefield. We raised peas, beans. tomatoes, carrots, squash, and probably several other kinds of veggies. I don’t remember them all, but I do remember that I learned to drive there. My father would park the car on Annawan, facing Quinobequin. [We drove this short distance in order to carry tools and other supplies.] I would get in, drive it to Edgefield, and then back up all the way to Quinobequin. In this way I could get enough distance to shift through the three gears. Exciting stuff for a 14-15 year old boy.

I can recall two major weather incidents in the 30s. In 1936 New England experienced a great flood. Just for example, the main street in Hooksett, New Hampshire was under 20 feet of water. We didn’t see that in Waban, but the Charles River was over its banks in many places. My father drove us down Annawan Road to Quinobequin, but he didn’t try to drive through any flooded areas.

Two years later, in September of 1938, Mother Nature struck again. It was an almost daily routine for us boys in the neighborhood to gather at someone’s house at 5:00 p.m. every day to listen to our “programs.” I’m hoping my memory is fairly accurate here, but I think this was the sequence of 15-minute programs we heard. First came “Dick Tracy” at 5:00; then “Terry and the Pirates” at 5:15. “Jack Armstrong, All American Boy.” was next at 5:30, and finally, at 5:45, “Tom Mix,” a western. At 6:00 it was time for all of us to go home to dinner. On the afternoon of Wednesday, September 22, 1938, we were all at 75 Annawan Road. It was raining hard, but that wasn’t usually a problem for 9 and 10-year old kids. I said goodbye and started up the road to my house at #41, only 3 houses away. As I passed #51 a huge gust of wind almost blew me off my feet. I crouched low and finally made it home. By then branches were beginning to fall, and trees were about to topple. My father, coming home from Boston with a friend, had to exit the car in a hurry when a giant tree fell and crushed the vehicle, on Roslyn Road. He walked the rest of the way home, wet and shaken by the hazardous trip. He had to dodge falling trees and branches and avoid downed electric lines all the way. By then everyone had lost power, and we didn’t get it back for about 3 weeks. School was closed all during that time. We happened to have a gas-powered refrigerator, and we were the only house in the neighborhood with refrigeration until power was restored. Many went back to ice. The

few ice companies left in the area did a booming business for a while. A lot of candles, batteries, and kerosene lamps were used for lighting. Utility crews came from all over the East to help get electric and phone lines restored. There was a flyer put out after the hurricane by the Improvement Society. It called for help to clean up the mess in Waban. [This too has been on the WIS website, by the way.]

Almost every road was blocked by fallen trees, and in 1938, there were no modern chainsaws. So men went out with axes, crosscut saws, and most anything they had that would help to clear the roads. Today a few chainsaws would make quick work of this. For those interested, the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA put out a book called, appropriately enough, "New England Hurricane" You can find copies on-line at various sites. Another thing to remember is that in 1938 there were no early warning systems. The Weather Bureau relied considerably on reports from ships at sea, and since most ships tried to avoid storms, the reports were sketchy. No radar, no satellites, no GPS in those days!

Since we're talking about modern technology here, I can recall when our telephones were operator-assisted. There were no dials (or push buttons). We picked up the phone and waited for an operator - always a woman - to say "Number, please." We would give her the number and she would ring it for us. I think there were three exchanges in Newton - Center Newton, West Newton, and Newton North. There may have been more, but those are the ones I remember. Along about 1940 we finally got a dial system. The phone company sent representatives to our junior high school to show us how these dials worked. They were rotary, of course. There were three Newton exchanges now - Bigelow, Lasell, and Decatur. These later became Bi 4, La 7, and De 2, and even later, to the system we have now - 244, 527, and 332. They are different today, of course.

Another aspect of phone service in those days was that the phone company did all the installations and provided [i.e., rented] all the phones. Since extras cost more, most people had only one telephone. It was usually located in a central location in the house. For an additional charge, you could have a "long cord" installed. This allowed you to move a few feet away from the phone box. My friend down the road and I used to drag our phones out on the front steps, call each other, and wave back and forth foolishly. Today everyone has a cell phone and probably doesn't understand how we could be amused that way. And say what you will about phone service - it is far less expensive, relatively, than it was then. I once called Needham from a phone booth in San Diego. I had ten dollars in quarters and the call took all but a couple of them for just 3 minutes of conversation. With the kind of service I have now, I can call anywhere in the US or Canada, talk as long as I wish, and pay a flat monthly rate. I'm sure most of you readers can do the same. But in the past, you would have paid huge amounts to make those long distance calls.

I've already mentioned that "modern marvel," Route 128, a.k.a. I95. The construction of that highway and of the Turnpike Extension through Auburndale, Newtonville, and Newton Corner has essentially destroyed parts of the City that were once pleasant places to visit. In my recent visits to Waban, I've noticed the noise of traffic where Rte. 128

passes by the Charles River and Quinobequin Road. I hope the proposed sound barrier will help. Much of Lower Falls has really suffered as a result of this construction. Over in Auburndale, that wonderful place that used to be Norumbega Park is just a shadow of its former self. I remember the zoo and the rides there, back in the 30s. I remember the hundreds of canoes on the river, perhaps the only thing that has survived. And those of us who are old enough may remember the Totem Pole Ballroom. Big bands and big name performers came there. It was the place to take a date on Saturday night. And we all lived close enough to Framingham to visit "The Meadows." a fancy nightclub type of place. I believe Vaughn Monroe, of big band fame, had a stake in The Meadows.

A final comment: As you may well imagine, it has been both a pleasure and a bit of a chore to try to recall all of this with any reasonable accuracy. I haven't lived in Waban since 1950, and I hadn't been back there since the 70s, when my parents sold their house on Annawan Road. So it was quite an emotional day when I returned to Waban last summer (2007). To my great surprise, however, it looked a lot like it did years ago. The foliage has changed - we lost a lot of trees in the '38 hurricane, and they hadn't grown that much by 1950. But overall it looked like the same cozy Waban I grew up in. It was and is a fine place to live. Enjoy it!