Freeport’s Earlier Days

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(The gist of a talk before the Exchange Club of June 9, 1971)

Freeport is pretty much my town when you figure the Freeport blood that’s mixed up in my veins – Smith, Benton, Carman, Raynor plus the Bethpage Powells. I have an idea there is a hint of Bedell, to although I cannot prove it.

I came into this world where the Chester A. Fulton funeral home now stands – the Fultons bought the site from the Smiths. Mr. Fulton was of a new brand of funeral directors, a brand that took much of the horror out of funerals. Old “Uncle Valentine” – a figure in the Smith family and the first Valentine – was laid away in the old style with his body turned in a sheet and placed in a low sort of bathtub with blocks of ice heaped above. The water from the melting ice drained off into buckets beneath the tub. A square wooden tube centered above Uncle Valentie’s face and anyone wishing a last fond look at the old gentleman could gaze down the tube and see his features in the eerie, bluish light that filtered through the ice.

Some unthinking Smith lifted my father, a four-year-old boy, to have a look down the tube. The sight so scared my father that for the rest of his life he had to force himself to look at a corpse. In passing it should be added that Uncle Valentine’s life and my father’s – also a Valentine – overlapped by four years and together covered all the Presidents from Washington through Franklin D. Roosevelt.

My father was working in a private bank in Far Rockaway by 1888 with Samuel R. Smith as president. The two were cousins and Samuel R. lived on the south side of
Smith Street midway between Ocean Avenue and Grove Street. They took turns riding the Long Island Railroad to Far Rockaway. They made daily rounds of the Freeport merchants just before the morning train picking up deposits and banking orders. They stepped off and stood beside the train at Rockville Center, Lynbrook, Woodmere and Cedarhurst to accept deposits and orders. This was surely banking by L.I.R.R. and I wonder how many times the banking made the railroad late. This system of banking continued until local banks arrived in the south shore villages.

In those days you did not buy a railroad ticket but used a mileage book. This was a strip of paper about 2 inches wide and five feet long folded between covers. The paper was perforated across every one-eighth inch an each little piece was worth one mile of travel. The conductor tore off the correct number of pieces. I do not remember the price of a mileage book but imagine it ran close to 1 cent a mile. Timetables in those days carried an extra column of print. It was the first column at the left in front of this station names and gave the number of miles of each station from Long Island City. It figured to tenths of a mile.

You all know the drugstore Smith & Bedell at the Triangle now called Cannon Square. The Smith part was my uncle, Charles P. Smith. It goes back before 1900 and the incorporation papers are lodged in the Freeport Historical Society Museum. Charles P. extended the sphere of his drug business by a weekly route to the villages to the east as far as Seaford. He used his bicycle, horse and buggy, or car over the route each Tuesday morning to pick up the orders left at the general stores. He filled them and delivered the same day. I have gone along with him several times.
Charles P. after he had retired from the store and after a cost accounting had become important, expressed the opinion that every soda he sold he very probably did so at a loss. He made wonderful sodas – tall glasses, milk, ice cream, flavoring and soda. His wife cooked up all his fruit flavors and he was generous with everything.

High up on the back wall of the drugstore hung the clock that really ran Freeport. It came as an advertisement in 1897, unless I figure all wrong. It looked like a school clock – big round face and underneath a small glass peephole through which the pendulum could be seen swinging back and forth. It was a dark finished wood with raised letters painted gold and announcing “Monelle’s Teething Cordial for children 25 cents Cures diarrhea, quind, colic, etc.” It was an 8-day clock and wound each Saturday night. It ticked along over the years without gaining or losing. And that is just the way it still goes as I have it now and the only thing it ever needs is to be wound every Saturday night.

My grandfather, J. Gilbert Smith, had an oyster business with his oysterhouse on Meadowbrook south of Merrick Road. He leased underwater land from the Town for his oyster beds. The coming of the L.I.R.R. with its freight service changed the oyster business a great deal. Oystermen had always carted the oysters to New York by horse-drawn vehicles or sailed them by boat. The weight of sending oysters in barrels by railroad was huge due to the shells. So shucking became the accepted method and oysters were taken from the shells and shipped in watertight containers something like nail kegs. The Town usually bought the discarded shells for road surfacing.
J. Gilbert supplied oysters to a couple of city hotels and two or three steamers. Occasionally he would have an order from one of his customers for a few hundred oyster shells – the deep halves. The shucked oysters presented a problem in serving on the half-shell – there were no shells. The eating places kept a supply of oyster shells on hand like they did dishes and slipped shucked oysters into empty shells and set them before the customer. More oysters were placed in the same shells and send back in for the next order.

Mary Smith Scott (no relative of mine) ran a remnant – one-of-a-kind – notions and real estate business in an old yellow house on the northwest corner of Main Street and Merrick Road. She was an unusual woman – hardworking, flush and broke, one of a big family and having a big family of her own. She was Dick Smith’s daughter and really managed his eating and drinking place on Meadow Island. Dick ran the bar and drank up the profits. Mary ran the dining feature and made a go of it.

One day a terrific summer thunder storm came in from the northwest with sudden sharp and vivid lightning. One bolt struck the chimney and came down into the kitchen where the family stood watching from a window. Dick and son Charles – Mary’s brother – were hit. Dick was stunned but Charles was killed.

Mary married a man named Scott and the two added on to the eating place and made a very showy and comfortable hotel out of it – Scott’s Hotel sometimes called the New Hotel. The couple had a big family in which a son was named Charles. Again the name was bad luck for Charles had signed on as carpenter’s helper aboard the Maine when the battleship blew up in Havana harbor in 1898.
In later years when Mary had more money she ordered one of the monument concerns at Greenfield Cemetery, Hempstead, to erect a suitable granite monument with bronze tablets at the site of the old eating spot and hotel on Meadow Island. The monument is of typical cemetery style and stands higher than I am. On one face a tablet sets forth the Smith and the Scott genealogy and around on the other side the bronze tablet gives the story of the two boys.

William and Walter Smith were boat builders making work boats mainly. Their homestead, farm and business was on the east side of Main Street opposite Lena Avenue. One is likely to wonder why they built boats a mile away from water. I do not know but that is how it was. Each boat was moved down Main Street the same way that houses were moved – cradles, planks, beams, rollers, grease, ropes and horses – skidded along. It took two days to bring a boat down Main Street and on to the soft mud of the creek below Raynor’s dam, Mill Road. The next high tide floated the boat. School children had a wonderful time after school playing on the boats as they moved along. Let one kid fall off and hurt himself and he was in line for a whipping not for being where he had no right to be but for getting himself hurt.

Farther down the creek was the Carman & Foreman lumber and coal yard. This was a truck-your-own business as the yard had water facilities and kept no horses and wagons. The Carman was my mother’s grandfather and the Foreman was Milton Foreman’s people.

The Carman homestead stood on the south side of Merrick Road between Ocean Avenue and Grove Street – a house with a great expanse of lawn. When the
homestead furnishing were sold at auction, Maude Nichols father attended to see what, if anything, he could use. Mr. Nichols owned the store on the northeast corner of Church Street and Merrick Road – now Spitzler. He brought home the old kitchen table. Maude liked that table and years later had it worked on. Layers of paint came off, much sanding and smoothing, and finally a beautiful refinishing job. Maude felt the table belonged in the original owner’s family so in her will she left it to me – a double drop leaf cherry table, a highly prized piece of furniture in my home.

Many will remember Archie Wallace, an uncle of mine and husband of my mother’s sister. He master-minded a speed trap here in Freeport when automobiles were beginning to become numerous. Archie figured out a scheme for quick funds to the village. We ran into this thing one Sunday afternoon when driving up from Far Rockaway for those famous sodas at the Triangle.

A group of men stood at the southeast corner of Ocean Avenue and Merrick Road. One stepped out, waved casually, doffed his gray derby and with a deep sweeping flourish greeted us into town. We retuned the wave and went right on. Down the road in front of Dr. Hammond’s place – now Chase-Manhattan bank – another group of men hurried into the street to halt us. They had a stopwatch and claimed we had come along too fast – had exceeded Freeport’s speed limit. Then someone recognized my father – as much a Freeporter as any of them. They tried to laugh the thing off and even had Archie Wallace come down from his corner to apologize for it was he of the gray derby, the signal to the stopwatch.
Dr. John H. B. Denton was the country doctor par excellence. He was my grandfather, a good doctor, and I doubt that he ever sent out a bill. I do not believe he even kept a book or any records. The lack of books made a mess of his estate and the lack of records turned out to be a nuisance. My birth was never recorded nor were scores of others. He took vital statistics very lightly.

Dr. Denton’s background was Bellevue Hospital in the city. He kept in close touch and frequently went back for special lectures and classes. He seldom had any money in his pocket and had a novel way of financing his Bellevue jaunts. He left his home and stopped along at various houses to ask if they could let him have a quarter, a half-dollar or something on what they owed him. By the time he reached the station he had enough in hand to make the round trip.

On summer Sunday mornings the doctor loved to take his ease beneath a weeping mulberry in his front lawn. He had his parrot chained loosely to a low branch close by. When church-bound friends and neighbors approached, he blew dense clouds of cigar smoke into the parrot’s face. The bird yelled and called out with a string of four-letter words greatly to the embarrassment of the passersby and the delight of the doctor. He would tip his hat and wish the folks a pleasant day.

I am inclined to think that the old burying ground on Pine and Church Streets was there before either the Presbyterian or the Methodist churches built nearby. That cemetery was a wild, overgrown, snaky place full of odd nooks and hideouts and crossed by miscellaneous paths and footways. The school took it over for high school purposes and the remains were dug up and taken to Greenfield. Considering the
general absence of stones, markers, monuments and records identification and location of graves would have been almost impossible except for one man – Furman Seaman, sexton of the Presbyterian church. He and/or his father had dug the graves and Furman’s memory was good enough to remember. Even so I wonder if there are not some bones still under the playground cement.

The Presbyterian and Methodist churches used to be over on Main Street about where Dave Levy’s store is now. The two buildings were separated by one or two empty lots but the services often conflicted – singing in one with sermon in the other and the windows wide open. But there was a mutual disturber – horseracing on Main Street right in front of the churches and during worship hours.

On the southwest corner of Main Street and Merrick Road stood Smith’s Tavern, a popular drinking place especially for the Century Runs passing through Freeport on the way to the turnaround at Patchogue. The horseraces were sort of unscheduled, impromptu things generating plenty of excitement and noise. The horses started several hundred feet north of the railroad tracks and came down the straight part of Main Street to a finish line in front of the Tavern at Merrick Road. The pounding of horses’ hoofs with the accompanying shouts and yelling was of no help to church services. The two congregations bought land over by the school and cemetery and built there.

There developed a nicety between the two rather rival denominations. Both churches placed bells in the tower above the entry porches. Pandemonium broke loose when both bells rang at the same time on Sunday mornings and evenings. The two
sextons fixed things up by carefully taking turns on the bell ropes. The Presbyterian went ding-dong and after a suitable pause the Methodist followed with its ding-dong. There were three minutes of turning the bells completely over for the ding-dong, and then two minutes of tolling – the Presbyterian ding and the Methodist dong. I remember seeing Furman Seaman lean backwards out of the Presbyterian belfry window to get the best of the Methodist bell so that the ringing were timed with measured pace and rhythm.

Let us finish this talk with the recollection of a lost art – the Sunday School picnics. The Presbyterians and the Methodists each held one picnic a summer and very likely at the same locations. The earliest were in a grove of trees a little north of Lena Avenue five or six hundred feet in from Main Street. The Presbyterians took along their melodian (reed organ) for some happy hymn singing during the afternoon. Two Smith sisters in that church always made and froze the ice cream asking everyone to donate as much cream as they could spare two or three days before.

Familiar things have a way of becoming tame and established, and so with the Freeport Sunday School picnics. They had to get bigger and better. They grew to be heavy undertakings like a train ride to Long Island City and then by water up the East River to picnic reservations even as far as Rye. Freeport nearly closed down for the picnics as almost everybody went to each one regardless of church affiliation. The railroad dropped enough empty passenger cars into the siding east of Main Street and left them there overnight. All had to be aboard with their baskets of food before the arrival of the westbound morning train. It backed in, coupled on the picnic cars, and off they went.
I have scratched the surface most mildly – there is plenty to tell about Freeport.