

Growing up in Cornwall – Four women share their stories

****Priscilla Hart Mauro, Janet Hedden Wildman, Dorothy May Winn Cecchinato and Phyllis Root Zucco****

By Brenda Underwood

Over 70 years ago, four little Cornwall girls, three of whom lived on adjacent dairy farms on Cherry Hill Road and one at Gold's Mills, grew up at a time when life was slower and more sedate but one also that called upon them to be resilient. They did farm chores, went to school together, played together and became friends.



In 2002, those four friends had an opportunity to reconnect during a program at the Cornwall Free Library organized by Jeremy Brecher which brought together a group of women to share memories of growing up in Cornwall.

Since that gathering at the library, Cilla, Janet, Dorothy and Phyllis have been getting together monthly to have lunch and reminisce about old times.

To provide some background, Priscilla (Cilla) Hart Mauro was born on January 23, 1927 and grew up on Cherry Hill Farm, so named for the cherry trees that once lined the road. "There are maple trees there now," said Cilla, which is where Janet's family's farm, Maple Hill Farm, got its name. Cilla's brother, Phil Hart, lives in Cornwall.

Janet Hedden Wildman was born November 21st 1928 and grew up at Maple Hill Farm on Cherry Hill Road. She now lives in Washington, CT. Her brother, Steve Hedden, lives in Cornwall as does her sister, Gail Dolan, who raises Belgian draft horses on Maple Hill Farm.

Phyllis Root Zucco was born on July 1st, 1929 at home in Torrington. She came to Cornwall when she was two years old to live with her grandmother at Gold's Mills. Phyllis moved to Massachusetts when she was 14. Her great, great grandfather and great, great uncles were Dibbles and were amongst the earliest settlers in Cornwall. She and Marion Blake are first cousins.

Dorothy May Winn Cecchinato was born on October 4th, 1929. Her mother was Esther Gertrude Hart and her father Leo Winn and they lived on Hart Holme Cherry Road Hill Road. "When my great grandfather (Hezekiah Hart) came there," said Dorothy, "they called it Hart Holme."

Memories of Dr. Walker

W. Bradford Walker, the town physician, lived on Jewell Street with his wife, Katie and their three sons and delivered most of the babies in town, including Cilla, Janet, Phyllis and Dorothy. Dr. Walker was a multi-generational baby deliverer and also delivered two of Dorothy's mother's four children (at home on the farm), Janet's two daughters and her son Steve's to sons.

Sometimes people couldn't pay for Dr. Walker's services in cash so they paid him in chickens and turkeys," said Cilla. "Dad insisted that we were not all paid for."

"Dr. Walker never talked much," said Janet, "he grumped. If you called him up you never started with any small talk you just launched right in to whatever your problem was. 'Yup,' he would say. He was the only person who could grump and make you feel better."

Dorothy remembers a childhood visit to see Dr. Walker. "I was out in the small pen at the end of the barn and my brother was moving the hay around with a fork. He put the fork right into the front of my leg so immediately we were off to Dr. Walker's. Dr. Walker took one look and said, 'We'll have to cauterize.' There was no anesthetic in those days so he goes and gets a long stick with cotton on the end of it and a jug of something, I suspect alcohol, and he just literally stuck that stick in the hole in my leg and said, 'OK, go home now and just watch it.'"

"He had everything he needed in his office. A tremendous wall full of medicines; you didn't have to go anywhere to buy it. He was famous for his cough syrup which he decanted into a smaller bottle and sent it home with you."

"It was probably 98% booze," interjected Phyllis.

Grade school

Phyllis went to Cream Hill School on Scoville Road where she was the only first grader among eight grades in the one-room school house. After first grade, she joined Cilla, Janet and Dorothy at the two-room school house in West Cornwall until the Cornwall Consolidated School opened in 1939.

Despite heavy snowfalls, school was never cancelled. However, Dorothy remembers one February 14th when it had snowed about 2 or 3 feet she was disappointed because she didn't think she would be able to get to school on Valentine's Day but, "Cousin Whit (Cilla's father)

called and said he would be taking the milk around on the horse-drawn wood-shod sled and would take us.”

“It was a rare event if you couldn’t get out on the road to deliver milk to West Cornwall,” said Cilla. “There was no problem getting the horses through the snow; they would just breast through it.”

“So my sister and I got down to Cilla’s house,” continued Dorothy, “and got on the sled underneath the canvas with Cilla and Nancy and we headed down to school with our Valentine’s and celebrated Valentine’s Day.”

Farm Life

Janet, Dorothy and Cilla all grew up on dairy farms (Maple Hill Farm, Hart Holme Farm and Cherry Hill Farm, respectively) and remember the things they learned – how to keep the stove going, how to bring in the wood, how to can and pickle with produce from the garden.

Times were very different then. There was no central heat; coal or wood was burned to heat the house, food was cooked on a wood-burning stove and the bathroom was outside.

“We also had a bathroom off our kitchen,” said Dorothy, “but it was only open during the summer because in the winter it would freeze up and you had to close it. So winter baths were in a round tub in front of the wood stove and everybody took a bath in the same tub of water.” As to who went first was another matter. “Mothers usually decided that,” said Dorothy, “usually the clean ones went first. It was like when they did the laundry – the white clothes first and then, after them came the work clothes.”

“My grandmother washed her clothes with a wash tub and a scrub board,” said Phyllis, “and the rinsing water always had bluing in it.”

“Phyllis’s grandmother washed and ironed clothes for other people,” said Cilla. “The irons were heated on the stove and interchanged as they cooled off. The handle fit on all the irons so you could just remove the handle.”

“I remember those irons,” said Janet. “Later on we used them as door stops. They were heavy. I’ve got something at home that my mother gave me – a bed warmer. It is a piece of marble or soapstone with a metal handle and you heated that up and put it in the bed to warm up.”

“We used to heat our curling irons in the wood damper of the stove also,” added Phyllis.

Winters and plowing the snow from the roads and paths were a challenge for the early residents of Cornwall. “To plow the snow out of the barnyard and the paths, Dad made a wooden wedge for a plow and hitched a single horse up to it and would stand on either side of the point of the wedge and drive the horse. I sat on the back to keep it weighted down – not that I weighed that much then,” said Janet.

Almost every day in summer, Phyllis remembers, she would be down at Cilla’s farm riding in on the hay loads. “I probably drove your father crazy,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Dorothy. “Cousin Whit loved kids. Whenever I saw him, he’d have one child in each arm, one on each shoulder and one hanging on around the neck. He would be running from the barn to the house; he never walked, he ran.” “That was his way,” said Cilla. “He would say, ‘Why walk when you can run.’”

Cilla recalls when she was a teacher, taking home three chickens that had hatched at school. “They would whine at night,” she said. “They made this very sad peeping sound and wouldn’t settle down. One time I reached in and they walked right up my arm and sat on my shoulder under my hair and peeped happily until they went to sleep. I put them to bed every night after that.”

“We had a couple of hens when I was little,” she continued, “that we used to dress up and put in the baby carriage and wheel them around. Later we put collars on the calves and we would go up on the hill and have a picnic with our calves; later on we moved to horses.”

Dorothy remembers one day riding Ginger, Ralph Scoville’s pony, and “our hired man who was sitting in the car eating his lunch, tooted the horn and the horse goes up in the air.” Dorothy didn’t come off, “but I learned how to handle him.”

“It was a wonderful experience growing up on a farm,” said Cilla.

Yutzler’s, Cochrane’s and Fred Bate’s Meat Market

Yutzler’s Store was the general food store where everything could be purchased and delivered. “Flour and sugar were rationed,” said Janet. “Remember the Oleo,” said Phyllis, “it came with a package of powder that you would mix in to get the color. It was like lard.” “That was your first Oleo” said Janet.

Cochrane’s General Store sold clothes, shoes and farm overalls. “I remember getting my Buster Brown shoes there,” said Phyllis. “They had everything.”

“The bus stop was right there,” said Cilla, “and children would congregate in Gordon’s store (Yutzler’s) while waiting for the bus. They must have been the bane of his existence because he couldn’t keep his eye on everyone. I’m sure candy disappeared.”

“Fred Bate’s Meat Market prepared the meat from the farms. They made sausage and prepared the ham and bacon from our pigs and then we got it all back. We got the bacon in big slabs that we would hang in the back pantry which was cold. We had everything from the pig - fresh sausage, ham, pig’s tongue, and pig’s liver.”

“I couldn’t eat the liver,” said Dorothy. “They would hang it on the porch to let it drip and I’d see that thing and then they would say, ‘We’ll have liver for supper tonight.’” “Although this was all during the Depression, we were never hungry,” said Janet. “We always had food.”

Spotting Airplanes during WWII

During the Second World War, Janet and Cilla remember being trained to spot airplanes and log the date and time the plane crossed in journals. “We took a training course and had to pass that before we were given a regular time to be on duty. In bad weather, however, people couldn’t make it so, as we were right next door, we filled in for them. The building was right on our property said Janet, “and Priscilla and I logged 300 hours spotting airplanes.”

“We had two-hour shifts during the day and three-hour shifts at night,” said Janet. “It was covered 24 hours. It was happening in every town on the east coast and up and down the eastern seaboard. Every town had one or two observation posts. We had to learn the planes, we had to know them from underneath, we had to know them coming at us, we had to know what they looked like from the side, we had to know single engine, double engine, four engine, we had to know our planes, we had to know the German planes, we had to know the British, the Lancasters, the Wellingtons – our fighters and their fighters. You tracked every plane in the sky. If a plane went over, we would pick up the phone and say “Army Flash” and we were connected to New Haven where they had a huge table with planes on it and long poles. As the calls came in they would move the plane across Connecticut. We are not talking high-flying jets; these were low-flying planes. A Messerschmitt was reported at one time but it was a Messerschmitt that had been captured and they were using it for training – not around here but somewhere else.”

“It was a way to mobilize Americans. I think they did everything they could to make it 100% per cent participation by the home front, something which you don’t have now.”

The Hurricane and Flood of 1938

During the flood following the hurricane of 1938, Cilla, Dorothy, Phyllis and Janet were going to the two-room school house in West Cornwall. They remember that the water was so high that it had reached the bottom of the covered bridge and was also lapping up against the school outhouse. “They never thought to evacuate us,” said Dorothy. “If that bridge had gone, we could have gone with it.”

“My grandmother lived in the second house down from the bridge,” said Cilla. “They gave a call and said the water was not that high but please come down and pick up my grandmother. So Dad gets down there and said, ‘We’ve got to get going, we’ve got to get out of here right away’ and my grandmother is hunting for her boots. Dad said, ‘Get out and get in the car.’ And just as they got out, the whole road from Yutzler’s on down just rolled right up.”

“And there was a building right after the post office,” said Janet, “that just collapsed and went down into the ravine.”

High School

All four women attended the Housatonic Valley Regional High School. Dorothy had her 60th reunion this past June but, according to Janet, the big one was the fortieth. “One thing I found interesting about our 40th was that 85 per cent of our class was practically living within shouting distance,” she said. “If they weren’t in Connecticut, they were just over the line in Amenia or Sheffield or Ashley Falls and the other 15% were like a scatter shot – they were in Florida, and Oregon and Montana.”

“Look at our own town of Cornwall,” said Cilla. “The old-time families are almost all represented by people who have either come back or who have never left. The Golds, the Duttons, the Calhouns, the Harts – all of these people are still here – and until fairly recently have all owned farms. They have been here for over 100 years.

Church Suppers

“We used to have church suppers at the congregational church,” said Janet. “It was during the Depression. We would have roast turkey or roast beef with lots of gravy and potatoes.”

“Ralph Scoville’s father would go to those dinners,” said Cilla, “and he would take you aside and say, ‘Now don’t forget, when you bring the pie I want two big pieces of cheese. Don’t forget the cheese.’ Every time you went by he said, ‘You haven’t forgotten the cheese have you?’”

Thanksgivings

“It was a big event when you got a turkey. Everybody would talk about how big theirs was, whether it was 14 pounds, or 18 pounds or 22 pounds. Now you go into a market and buy a turkey, and you don’t think anything of it.”

“Dad brought one home for us one year,” said Dorothy, “It was the most miserable bird. He chased us kids – there were four of us – and would peck at us. Dad finally had to cage it before they could cut its head off and use it.”

“One thing about Thanksgiving,” said Cilla, “was that everyone was your parent. Nobody hesitated to speak up and tell you what was right and what was wrong. And you didn’t resent it.”

Janet, who usually celebrates her birthday just before Thanksgiving, remembers during the war that she celebrated her birthday on Thanksgiving Day. Franklin Roosevelt declared in New York State that Thanksgiving be celebrated a week earlier and it fell on her birthday. They called it ‘Franksgiving’.

Christmas

“I can remember Christmas was usually one gift. And a tangerine in the toe of your stocking,” said Phyllis. “And a walnut” said Janet. “At Sunday School in the little chapel in West Cornwall, which was our winter time church, you always got an orange and a little box shaped like a house with hard candies inside,” said Dorothy.

“At Christmas time,” Cilla remembers, “We would take the horses and a sled and go out into the woods and gather the material to make our wreaths. There were several different kinds of pine – princess pine and running pine – and you used it carefully. You didn’t always pick all of anything in one area. It was fun going through the snow with the horses.”