

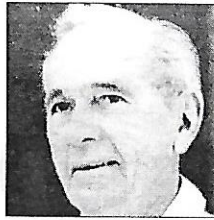
Early trains: farmers' bane, but one's pleasure

In the mid part of the last century the railroad barons were laying tracks about as fast as they could beg, borrow or steal the right of way for their tracks. The people here in East Haven were not too enthusiastic about having the smoking engines fouling up their air and cutting a gash across choice farming land. The tracks, at first single track, passed a few thousand feet south of the present location and did not cut through Mullein Hill until about 1885 when the second set of tracks were installed. Our citizens did not patronize the service to any extent and it was not long after the trolley cars came to town that the passenger station was closed, except for the mail drop off. The freight station remained open until after World War II.

The station at the lake, "Saltonstall Station," was a busy place all year long, from first opening around 1855, until the lake was sold to the water company around 1895. Thousands came to the place to picnic, swim or enjoy the summer playground at the north end of the lake. Skating in the winter brought just as many, especially during the ice skating craze of the 1880s. Long hourly trains arrived from other towns almost continually during the seasons, and the profits to the road were great. Ice that was cut was shipped by train from a spur track to ships in the harbor which carried the ice to the islands and all down the coast. The ice business was phased out when the more dense longer lasting ice from northern New England became available.

Each property owner worked out his own financial deal with the railroad. Naturally, all wanted the much-needed cash that the land would bring, and from then on it was to get all the fringe benefits that could be had. The tracks passed mainly through farming country between cities and this presented somewhat of a problem for the farmer, especially when his lots straddled the tracks.

The road to Guilford, in places, winds back and forth under the tracks and this was one of the solutions for the farmer. The underpasses allowed farming to continue. In some places a corduroy road was laid across the tracks with planks laid opposite on each side to discourage the animals from wandering up and down the tracks. Fences along the tracks also controlled animals from wandering. Where roads crossed the tracks, gates were installed and a passerby had to remove or swing the gates before and after crossing over. These were generally called "Pent Roads" and the last in East Haven was near the gap at Lake Saltonstall, on the old "Proprietors Highway" that ran to Foxon. People became lax at this gate and caused the adjacent farmer some headaches, which most solved by stopping the cattle business or by using other pastures. The last dairy, just north of the



GLEANINGS

Cliff Nitchke

old railroad station, called the Mullein Hill Dairy used Mullein Hill territory and some land north of the tracks that bordered the Farm River. Proprietor's Road was on the east side of the river and presented no problem for the dairy owners. It should be remembered that the dairy business from about 1850 to the early first third of the 20th Century was the main business of local farmer in East Haven.

As I said before each property owner worked out his own deal, and the most common request was for a lifetime pass on all the companies' roads, and this did not bother the barons a bit. They reasoned, and correctly so, that the average farmer did not have the time or the money to do much traveling and outside of a few trips to the big cities, where else would they go?

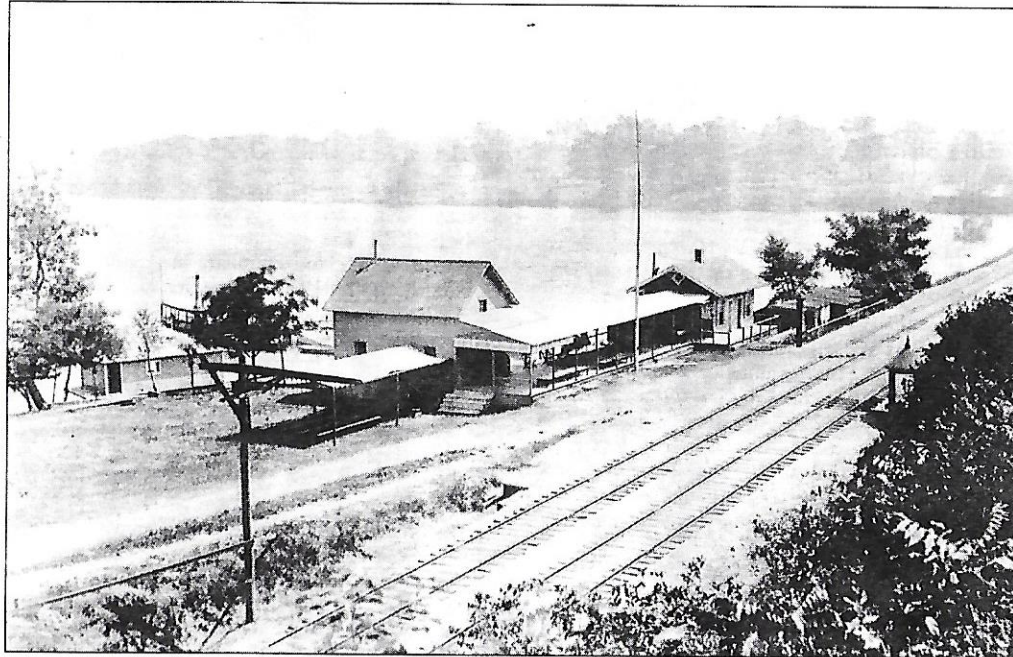
Some of the land sellers wanted the system to pick up parcels in town and many wanted them to pick up corn and grain and deliver the grain to the East Haven mills for grinding, later returning the meal to them from the mills. This was a seasonal thing and again Mr. Railroad went along with their demands, dropping off the product at the East Haven or Saltonstall Station, depending on the mill involved. There were two mills at the Saltonstall overflow and one mill at the Farm River and of course there were mills in Foxon on the Mill River.

One old timer wanted all of these privileges, plus free meals in the dining cars, as long as he or any

member of this family wanted. Furthermore they were to stop the train at his farm to pick him up and bring him home again when the trip was finished. Again the railroad executives said, "How often will the farmer travel, and how many meals can he eat in our cars?"

How they erred here, for the farmer stopped the train every morning from the time the trains were in service and operating. Right after his milking was done and the animals fed, still in his work clothes and manure-covered boots, he would sit down in the dining car at a white table cloth and silver service, right among the professional men heading for work in the big cities. The latter's cries were loud and clear, but to no avail. The farmer would have a leisurely breakfast and detrain somewhere before New York, go into the station to wash up a bit, buy a paper and pipe tobacco or cigar, hop on a returning train, sit and smoke while reading his daily paper. Instructions were given to the conductor that the train was to stop at his farm and let him off, after which he went back to his daily chores.

The powers that were tried all kinds of persuasions and legal methods to get out of this agreement without any luck - the farmer was enjoying his life. I never found out how the problem was finally solved but I assume that enough money was probably offered to influence a suitable solution, at least, for the farmer. Perhaps they were lucky that he did not take his whole family, and the dog, along with him each day.



The Lake Saltonstall Railroad Station, circa 1885.