

SYMMES FAMILY FARMS

By Ellen Knight¹

From today's Symmes Rotary uphill to Highland Avenue and downhill to the river, the Symmes family farmed. They did so in the early years for the family and later as market gardeners. And they did so very successfully.

In 1889, it was reported that "Mr. Marshall Symmes is erecting a \$4000 greenhouse for the purpose of raising cucumbers, etc., for our early market. This go-ahead farmer has 70 tons of squashes on hand as one item of vegetation that he has successfully trapped from the sun and atmosphere above and the earth beneath."²

Over time, the size of the farm dwindled as parcels were sold off. Samuel S. Symmes had an orchard in the vicinity of today's Ridgefield, Edgehill, and Bruce Roads, "where he raised the finest peaches that ever entered the Boston markets."³ This area was subdivided about 1914.

Symmes, however, continued to operate a successful dairy until the mid-1960s. Resident Malcolm Masters recalled, "the farm itself went up the hill and beyond up in the region where Highland Avenue is... the barns being part way up the hill, and they had maybe fifteen or twenty cows and a wagon or two and a couple of pungs for the winter that they delivered the milk around locally. We would sometimes go around helping with them when we weren't at school."⁴

LEARNING ECONOMY ON THE FARM



*Marshall Symmes House
230 Main Street*

One lesson farm life teaches is economy. Marshall Symmes (1894 - 1974) knew this. About a century ago, he worked on the farm belonging to his grandfather, also named Marshall. He grew up in his parents' house (243 Main St.), located on the edge of his grandfather's farm, which included the tenant house (233 Main St.). His grandparents lived across the street (230 Main Street).

The farm lay between Main Street and Highland Avenue and was a larger operation than the farm of Symmes' cousin George Locke up on Ridge Street (a remnant of which is known as the Wright-Locke Farm). In 1909, it was assessed at about eight times the value of the Locke farm. According to the assessment, the Symmes farm had two barns, three squash houses, a wash house, a wagon house, two sheds, and five green houses. An ice house was located near one of two small ponds, and there was also a poultry house.

"We farmed almost entirely for the Boston market, fresh vegetables, and we sold good vegetables," Symmes told Wallace McDonald in 1969.⁵

They grew what would sell. “We had a good market for it, and we made money on those. Several of the big hotels in Boston wouldn’t buy anybody else’s vegetables except ours. The Parker House was a customer of ours. We had a brook running through the place, and we got the idea of raising things that they put in mints, like mint juleps, and watercress, we raised that, in bushels, wagon loads of it.”

They had orchards and raised lettuce and turnips, among other vegetables. “We did not raise potatoes. We could make more money on other things than potatoes. We raised great quantities of celery, which we bleached. They’re all solid green now, and I don’t buy celery any more. Doctors sold people the idea that it was better for you to eat the green celery, which is tough and stringy and whatnot. We put it in pits and treated it and aged it, and our celery was all bleached white when we sold it, and people came from everywhere to buy it. Now it isn’t sold in the market in Boston at all.”

What they could not sell helped feed the animals. “We had 20 horses and 12 cows. The horses, except in the winter time, we used them quite heavily, 12 hours a day, 60 hours a week.” The cows ate many of the vegetables not good enough to go to the market. “You can’t feed turnips to them, because it makes the milk taste. But they loved things like squash that are misshapen or got spots on them.”

“We had 600 chickens, and we kept guinea hens and a flock of turkeys and a flock of mallard ducks, and they’d eat a lot of the waste things, the trimmings from the vegetables. We always trimmed them off carefully. Nowadays they don’t do that, but we trimmed them off.”

Even the rocks were part of the farm economy. “The farm was studded with glacial boulders, and it was part of our job to pry those out with crowbars, and we’d get them in piles and then we sold them. At one time most of the houses in Winchester were built with stones from our farm, for the cellars. If they were too big to handle actually, we took a 16-pound hammer and split them. I got so I was quite accurate at that. The fire station in West Medford is built with stones from our farm.

“And I remember they had a conference one time and they decided that they better get rid of those stones quick, because cement was just coming in, and as soon as cement came we couldn’t sell our stones any more.

“Now we also sold stones to make macadamized highways. There was a portable stone crusher set up at the corner of Highland Avenue and Main Street with a ramp, and we’d back the tip carts up loaded with stones and dump them down the shoot, and all of Highland Avenues was macadamized with stones from our farm.” According to the Town’s 1909 Annual Report, Highland Avenue was macadamized 6 inches deep and 24 feet wide.

“A farmer has to cut corners pretty sharp to make a living, even in those days. You had to work hard and make everything pay. You just couldn’t throw anything away. I know what the town

does now, and I'm appalled at what's thrown away. We sold all the waste metal. We sold all the waste everything. If we didn't sell it, the animals or the hens ate it up, and we made money."

With more skills, a farmer could be more economical. "My grandfather was not only a farmer but he was a blacksmith and a good one. Into the bargain he made farm wagons, and quite a few of them were in use when I was a boy. He made his own axles. He made his own tire rims. And you know what he made those axles out of? I was surprised. He collected discarded horseshoes, and then he forged them up somehow or other, and I've seen those axles he made out of those horseshoes, and I still don't for the life of me how it did it with the antique equipment he had at the forge and so forth, but that's what he did."



*Marshall Symmes Tenant House
233 Main Street*

The farms also provided employment for others. According to Symmes, "We hired the first Italian to come to Winchester. When the second one came, the first one brought him down for a job, and we hired him, too, and they were both good workers." They left, though, to make more money at the Beggs and Cobb tannery. But others came. "They used to bring their friends down. They were all good workers on a farm."

Carmen Frongillo, a charter member of the Sons of Italy, confirmed this. "Mr. Symmes and Mr. Russell, they were the two farms in Winchester, and between the two of them I think that possibly 70% of the people that worked for them were of Italian extraction and that 30% was Irish."⁶

In 1911, Marshall Symmes (the grandfather) died. His son Walter, young Marshall's father, had already died in 1907. The farm, minus the houses on Main Street, was sold to George Henry who built a grand new house on Highland Avenue, now the home of the Winchester Community Music School.

The Symmes farmhouse still survives, but without its setting. The hillside with its crops of vegetables and fruits, its cows, ducks, chickens, geese, and guinea hens has all been divided into house lots. Fortunately, the memories of Marshall Symmes were recorded to help recall the agricultural heritage of Symmes Corner.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan. 4, 2010. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² "Winchester" column in *Woburn Journal*, Nov. 8, 1889.

³ Henry S. Chapman, *History of Winchester, Massachusetts*, p. 304.

⁴ Interview of Malcolm Masters by Florence Hritzay, May 20 1981.

⁵ Interview of Marshall Symmes by Wallace McDonald, 1969.

⁶ Interview of Carmen Frongillo by Wallace MacDonald, 1969