



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Conant House Christmas 1915

The following is excerpted from Cape Cod Yesteryears: The Life and Short Stories of Eleanor Conant Yeager by Robert Conant Ellis.

The wondrous smell of apple-butter, beach plum jelly and the first of the fruit cakes filled the house. The brace of ducks hanging frozen in the woodshed made our mouths water whenever we were sent there for wood to fill the box by the stove. Yes, it not only felt like Holiday time, it smelled like it.

Papa, Mama and we two girls lived just off the village green in the old whaling village of Falmouth, Massachusetts. Our large rambling house was built about 1740. It had much history connected with it. Paul Revere, it is said, once stayed here when he put the bell in the belfry of the Congregational Church. We like to think he did.

Papa, red-faced, rotund and jolly, set great store with the eating part of Christmas. How well I remember the preparations for the big feast. It all seemed to start when he heard the first honk of a goose going south. He never let Mama rest until the mince meat was made and the fruit cakes, dripping with brandy, were put into the pantry. These two things just had to be made ahead of time.

And – if my sister and I were caught lally-gagging after school, we were put to work on the popcorn and cranberry garlands, even though Mama said it was too early for the cranberries. “Why, Pa,” she sputtered, “it is only a week after Thanksgiving. The cranberries’ll be all dried up.”

“No, they won’t,” Pa said. “I’ll put them in the root cellar under the barn.”

That closed the subject of the cranberries.



Above: Christmas card, ca. 1915.

Right: Watercolor on paper by Henry Hauser, 1950.





Eleanor's parents, William and Margaret Conant, ca. 1910.

Conant House, ca. 1946. Note the porch and low-roofed addition, which accommodated the Conants' summer lodgers. Both novelties were torn down after the Historical Society acquired the house in 1966.

Another reason we weren't too happy about stringing popcorn and cranberries was the fact that we had seen the new fangled tinsel in the variety store down Main Street. Most of our friends had already stocked up on it, and what a sight their Christmas trees would be. The tinsel was shiny and bright, it would gladden anyone's heart, especially when the little candles were lit on the tree. I could just close my eyes and see that tree all asparkle, and it made me sick to think we had to settle for popcorn and cranberries.

The days flew by, excitement heightened. Under the bed in the spare room packages were beginning to pile up. Each one was tied with one of Papa's peculiar way of tying so he would know if anyone got into them. But, they did get a good going over. . . .

About a week before Christmas, Mama's two brothers came down on the train from Boston to spend the holiday with us. They were bachelors. Papa slyly insisted upon inviting them a week before the holidays because he could put them to the wood pile. Actually they liked to split wood – gave them exercise, they said. At any rate, they split and

chopped enough wood, logs and kindling for most of the winter's use.

Papa, coming from his job at the railroad station, liked the sound of the chopping ringing out in the crisp December air, and before his dinner at noon, joined them for a 15-minute session. There was much joking and laughter, when they came into the kitchen, as to who could chop faster. Mama said as she dished up huge dishes of stew or chowder, "Get away from that woodpile, you eat too much." Yes, that week before Christmas was a fun week for my sister and me.

Christmas Eve the sky darkened and it looked like snow. Uncle Jack came in from the woodpile, his tall lanky frame backed up to the stove, rubbing his hands and said, "Girls, it's going to snow and snow and snow."

Papa came home at noon for his dinner just as the first flake fell. "By gosh," he said, tapping the barometer, "going to be a ripper of a storm, barometer's fallen five points

since morning.”

At three o'clock it was pitch dark, the wind out of the north, and as Papa would say, “blowing a living gale.” The snow drifted along one side of the house, the side where Papa always banked the house with seaweed to keep out the cold.

Our two uncles ventured out occasionally, shoveling snow away from the doors, then coming back in blowing on their hands. They made a bee-line for the stove, partly to get warm and partly to see what Mama had for supper. It was always the same on Christmas Eve, escalloped oysters, fresh apple sauce, home made bread and Indian pudding. In the center of the table was a bayberry candle. Mama said it was good luck to burn a bayberry candle on Christmas Eve.

Around five o'clock Papa burst into the kitchen stamping the snow off his boots. “Station agent heard from Boston – train'll be four hours or more late. Got to get a snow plow to run ahead of her and clear the tracks.”

“Oh, my,” Mama cried, taking the oysters from the oven.

“Get the supper on the table, Ma. I'm lucky to be home to eat – awful night.”

We all sat down and had our Christmas Eve supper, pausing now and then to listen to the wind howling around the house. Papa said, letting his belt out one notch, “Don't trim the tree 'til I get home – surprises for all.” And he winked at us girls.

We tidied up the kitchen, played Parcheesi with the uncles, then got ready for bed. Mama could see the station from the house, and she kept looking out the kitchen window. As we were about to get into bed, we heard her cry: “Train's just coming in, praise be.”

It snowed all night. When morning came the north side of the house was completely covered with snow, which made the house very dark. We were annoyed with ourselves



Make it a

“Safe and Sane” Christmas

- 1 Do your shopping before the rush while the stocks are complete
- 2 Give useful gifts; we're ready with the things men and young men buy for themselves; clothing and furnishings of the finest grades; Walk-Over shoes; slippers.

Women will like to shop here.

JOHN S. ARENOVSKI,
The Home of Hart Schaffner & Marx Clothes. **FALMOUTH**

Don't forget our Ladies Department, the Largest this side of Boston

Top: The Dude Train, which ran between Falmouth and Boston 1884-1916.

Bottom: Advertisement for Main Street merchant, 1916.



Above: St. Barnabas Church, ca. 1905.

Below: Card sent to St. Barnabas parishioners by Rev. H. H. Smythe, in the same snowy year that Eleanor is describing. Although Eleanor's family attended St. Patrick's Church, they likely shared the town's general affection for Rev. Smythe.

for over-sleeping. The smell of pancakes finally woke us. We put on our wrappers and flew down the back stairs. Our uncles were on their second round of pancakes. Papa was fussing about getting out to feed the hens. Everyone told him in unison to wait until they could make a little path to the henhouse. My sister and I wanted to make a dash for the parlor where the presents and tree were, but Mama made us get dressed and eat our breakfast first.

Everyone but my sister and me filed into the parlor, and we supposed they were lighting the little wax candles . . . Finally they called, "Everything's ready! Come in,

girls." There was Mama by the parlor door, standing with a bucket of water just in case the tree caught fire. What a tree! The little candles were burning brightly, brighter than we had ever seen them, for the whole tree was decked in tinsel, the glorious, beautiful tinsel from the Variety store downtown. The popcorn and cranberry garlands were there, too, but we didn't see them. Our eyes were on the tinsel. My sister and I hugged everyone again and again until Papa said, "Aren't you going to open your presents?"

The morning passed happily and pleasantly, the jingle of sleigh bells coming into the house softly but sweetly. The paths were dug to the henhouse and the street. Mama said to shovel the path to the street first, for we were to go to church. "It is Christ's birthday," she said, "and we must think of Him."

*Eleanor Conant Yeager
(1904-1981)*