



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



## The Stationmaster

by Meg Costello

In the early decades of the twentieth century, visitors descending from the train at Falmouth's depot were greeted by the friendly, mustachioed face of William Conant. Will served as the railway express agent in Falmouth from 1902 to 1935. He had to meet every train arriving and departing: three passenger trains and one freight train daily (except Sundays), plus the Dude Train in season.



William Allen Conant (1867 - 1960)

That's not even counting the local runs between Woods Hole and Buzzards Bay.

In those years, the train was the lifeline of the town, connecting it to the outside world. Shipments of cranberries, strawberries, oysters, and turnips went out. Goods for local businesses came in, along with hundreds of visitors eager to enjoy a Cape vacation.

Friends detected an air of quiet peace about Will. To the chaos on the platform, he brought order. Using his gold watch, and his eye for detail, he directed people and packages to their proper

destinations in a timely fashion. There must be no clutter on his platform, and nothing must interfere with the smooth flow of trains in and out of the Falmouth Village station.

Challenging his sense of command, every summer the Beebes would arrive with their bounteous possessions in special Pullman cars. Local people liked to say that Emily Beebe filled nearly a whole baggage car with her hat boxes alone. This was probably an exaggeration, but even so, Will always had to employ extra men to haul the Beebes' cargo up the hill to Highfield. For this



**Top: William Conant, second from left, with other station employees in the photo above. Photo from *Ring around the Punch Bowl* by George Moses, p. 119.**

**Above: Train ticket in the Museums' archives.**



**A busy day at the Falmouth Depot, c 1910. Photo in Museums' archives.**

daughters, Mary and Eleanor, hurried from their family home on Palmer Avenue to the depot, hoping to watch the animals get off the train. To their delight, they saw five elephants joined trunk to tail, two camels, ponies, lions, and tigers. Practical Will, thinking of his garden, sent his daughters out with shovels to collect the manure, after the parade had passed by.

Will rarely enjoyed an uninterrupted Christmas at home. On the morning of December 25, he usually stayed long enough to see the girls open their presents, then headed to the station to meet the train. On one occasion, during a fierce Christmas blizzard, he remained at the depot far into the night, until the tracks were cleared and the last train made it through.

Although he couldn't take time off on the holiday itself, Will found other ways to make the season memorable for his family. In her memoir, *Cape Cod Yesteryears*, Eleanor Conant recalled how her father arranged a holiday shopping trip to Boston. Dressed in their best clothes, the Conants arrived at the depot by sunrise to catch the early train. To their surprise, the two girls and their mother, Margaret, found themselves ushered into a deluxe parlor car. With deep red carpeting and plush velvet chairs that twirled round and round, such a car was usually reserved for the wealthy passengers on the Dude Train. Will had heard that the empty parlor car was going to be transported to Boston attached to the Saturday early morning train. He'd secured permission for his family to ride in it, as a special treat.



**Left: Parlor Car on the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad**



**Right: The Dude (or Flying Dude) Train was privately chartered by a group of wealthy Bostonians who owned summer residences along the shores of Buzzards Bay. It ran once a day on weekdays from June to October, 1884-1916. The Dude shaved an hour and ten minutes off the time logged by the regular train.**

That trip made a lifelong impression on Eleanor, and not just because of the luxurious

he received a \$2.50 gold piece, the standard Beebe tip for services rendered. In the off-season, he oversaw the daily shipment of fresh produce and dairy items from the Beebe Farm, located between Shore and Walker Streets, to the family's mansions in Boston.

It's hard to imagine anyone making more of a stir about town than the Beebes. Only a traveling circus could beat them for glamor and excitement. In fact, an actual traveling circus did come to Falmouth while Will was the stationmaster. His young



**Above: Quincy Market, Boston, Mass., c1904. Photo at Library of Congress**

**Right: Matchbook for Durgin-Park Restaurant, est. 1827, famed for its communal seating, Yankee boiled dinners, and rude waitresses.**

parlor car. The day was packed with memories. The train had to pause at the canal, where the drawbridge was raised to let a Norwegian freighter pass through. Eleanor waved at the sailors, and they whistled back at her. At South Station, the Conants caught a cab to Faneuil Hall. The marketplace there was jammed with a noisy tangle of delivery wagons, pulled by hairy-hoofed dray horses. The family ate lunch at the legendary Durgin-Park Restaurant, where “sawdust was on the floor and butchers with bloody aprons were sitting at long tables with well-dressed Bostonians or tourists.”<sup>ii</sup> The surroundings may have seemed primitive, but the restaurant’s generous portions of fish chowder, lobster salad, steak, and strawberry shortcake hit the spot!



When lunch was over, Will said “I’m going to let you do the stores. Don’t want a man hanging around when you do women things.” After several enjoyable hours of shopping, Margaret and the girls rejoined Will at South Station in time to board the late afternoon train for home. As they approached bearing their packages, he called to them across the cavernous waiting room, “Did you have a good time? Did you get the new dresses?”<sup>iii</sup>

As for himself, he had spent the afternoon at the express office at South Station, watching the workers handling the incoming baggage and express packages. Such was his idea of pleasure—this “quiet man who liked a quiet house,”<sup>iii</sup> but whose ears always pricked up at the sound of a train whistle.

<sup>i</sup> Eleanor Conant and Robert Conant Ellis, *Cape Cod Yesteryears* (Falmouth, 2010), p. 66.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.



**Left: South Station and Elevated Railroad, Boston, 1905. Photo at Library of Congress.**

**Right: Façade, Filene’s Store, Boston, Mass. c1915. Photo from the Boston Pictorial Archive at digitalcommonwealth.org**

