

Freedom Folkways

Stories told by John E. Thurston born, in Freedom, in 1893



John E. Thurston was born in a 2-story farm house that clung to the brow of a foothill, 3 miles from Freedom Village, near Green Mtn.

There were stone walls to leap, brooks to fish and teachers to tease in the one room Farnsworth School, at the foot of the hill, where he studied, when teachers were available, with his 5 sisters and brother.

Between school time and chore time, he cut many a caper, but his drolleries and quick wit almost always rescued him from scrapes. He was the despair of his teachers and spent more time on the punishment bench, beside the teachers stand than he did at his desk. The bench, boarded up, in front, was supposed to cut off communication, but John soon found a knot-hole thru which he wagged a friendly finger at the class. When the scholars laughed and the teacher turned around from the blackboard, John was always engrossed in his books.

His father took his misbehavior calmly saying that the trials of the teacher were mild enough compared to those in his day. He could remember how the Whiting boys at the school on Ross Hill, near the Eaton Center Meeting House always initiated a new teacher by lugging him outside and sitting on him.

The members of the school committee, elected by the Selectmen, were discouraged until a male candidate appeared and assured them he could handle the situation. On the first day, he took a revolver out of his desk and placed it on top in plain view of the scholars. They watched intently while he stuck 3 large brass-headed tacks into the opposite wall. Without a word, he took careful aim and drove those tacks in with 3 shots. "Now", he said, quietly, "I drove those tacks out of site and I can do the same with you." He had no problems with discipline after that.

When school lets out there was plenty of fun, climbing the big spruce trees in the Paugus Mountains for hunks of spruce gum the size of 50 cent pieces or luring rabbits into a box on top of the hill. A large black spot was painted on the end of the box and a rabbit flushed out by yells made straight for the box thinking it was a hole in a log. Temporarily stunned, he was easily captured. Playing ball was high adventure with balloons made out of dried hog bladders blown up with the stem of a corn-cob pipe. On the way home there were ducklings to hunt, cunningly hidden under the leaves on the river bank back of Ed Thurston's pasture and in the yard, an angry gander could always give a boy a run for his money right up to the kitchen door if he stole one of her goslings.

In winter he coasted in an oblong maple sap pan guiding it by hitching from side to side. The other boys nearly broke their necks trying to imitate him. Then he had an idea...why not make a flexible flyer out of a pung bottom by nailing a rocker to the front end and control it for steering with a rope attached to both ends? This looked pretty good so he nailed joists to the sides and end for 10 seats and away John and Co. went, for a 2.5 mile ride from the top of Meeting House Hill in Eaton Center to the middle of Crystal Lake in E. Madison. They went at such a clip that scouts had to be posted to signal "All Clear" on Horse Leg Hill. John's father thought the flyer was just the ticket for hauling wood which cut down considerably on coasting time. He also thought the tree house was just the place for John, armed with a club, to watch for skunks and hedge hogs in the corn patch on moonlit nights. There were more tiresome hours for John until he discovered that the best way to hunt for hens eggs was to nap on an 8X8 beam up in the barn and wait for the triumphant cackle of a hen to wake him up as she flew off her nest after laying an egg.

Winter evenings weren't too dull in Freedom. The villagers set great store by progressive concerts that gained in harmony as they went along. A violin player called on a harmonica player. The two picked up a trumpet player and wound up at an organ players house and the progressive concert was in full swing.

Concerts were a family affair in John's home with Aunt Alfreda Hayes playing the organ and Uncle George Hayes making the sweetest music John ever heard, on a violin fashioned from a cigar box. John chimed in on a harmonica and occasionally an alto horn. Chore time didn't leave much time for practice on the horn. During intermission, John entertained with acrobatic tricks. One of his favorite performances was a somerset, so called, head down on the seat of a chair much to the consternation of Grandmother Hayes who feared he would break the chair. When he landed right side up, Grandfather Hayes always exclaimed triumphantly, "that chair didn't move an inch". The trick that brought down the house was an upside down balancing act on a milk bottle while threading a needle. John's acrobatic rival in Freedom was known as "Limber Luke" because he could jump "so he was sitting on springs".

Another rival, the champion croquet player of Freedom, challenged him to a match. John won handily with a mallet he had made from a small oak shellacked and trimmed. The handle was cut down from a broom fitted square. The defeated champion insisted on examining John's mallet after the game and discovered that the handle was an inch longer than his. For some unknown reason a return match was never held.

Even in raising garden stuff, there were triumphant moments such as hearing the earth crack and seeing a bean sprout emerge or occasionally fooling the crows who seldom failed to spot a hill of corn even when hoe marks had been painstakingly obliterated. The skies were better than books for studying at sunset and moon-rise for cloud formations forecast rain and a day off from plowing. Other promising portents were a shower when the sun was shining and the call of a cuckoo "in the holler" that meant "rain tomorrer". In the winter, if the snow blew off the oxen, it would snow. When it melted, it would rain. In the spring when the leaves on an apple tree reached the size of a mouse's ear, it was time to plant corn. John's father spurred him on by telling how Grandpa Aaron Heard grew turnips on top of the mountain so big they had to be pried out with a crowbar. Plenty of plowing practice won John accolades from Uncle Ed Brown, in Ossipee a few years later. "He's a good man", commented Uncle Ed when he happened by as John was

plowing Sumner Bennet's field in Ossipee. "Every furrow turned upside down in a straight line and not a spear of grass showing and there isn't a wet hair on the horses."

A man who did not have an intuitive understanding of animals would have wound up in the poor house in the old days. How else could a pair of steers or a horse be trained to turn a straight furrow and reverse at the end of a row? The secret was to hold the plow loosely and know the horse. Even a blind horse could be trained to step over a log at a touch on his knee if he trusted his master. "The prettiest way to break steers," John said, "was to hitch a horse between them. Our old mare, Kate, always nipped them when they didn't behave."

A cattle watch dog named "Rover" shared honors with old Kate. Rover was the wonder of Freedom. Trained from puppy-hood, he never failed at a command to bring the cows in from the pasture in an orderly line every day. One ornery cow named "Brindle" liked to jump a stone wall into a field beyond the pasture. Rover found the break in the wall and watched crouched in the bushes. When Brindle jumped over, Rover was on the ready to drive her back...she soon gave it up. One day she balked and refused to go into her stall. "Get her," said John's father, "it's you or her." He left the barn but John stayed to watch and saw Rover take Brindle by the nose and hang on while she struggled vainly to free herself. It was no use. She was beaten and meekly went to her stanchion and stayed there.

A neighbor, who tried in vain to buy Rover, set a trap for him and Rover was caught. By the time he was found, he had become ferocious with pain. Attempts to release him were unsuccessful and he had to be destroyed. After that, John trained the cows to come at call.

Famous fore-runner of Rover was a black St Bernard dog named Figaro, still remembered in Freedom. He was owned by Mr. Farnsworth who lived in what is now the Weed place. Whenever Mr. Farnsworth had eggs to exchange for groceries, he placed a list in the bottom of a basket with the eggs on top and gave it to the dog who carried it in his mouth to the nearest grocer in East Madison. In earlier days, Mr. Farnsworth would have hauled his dairy products to Portland by oxen to exchange for staples. When the dog entered the store, after a 2 ½ mile trot, he would look around for the storekeeper. "Well," the grocer used to say, "Guess you want something." After this greeting, the dog always sat down and waited for the basket to be unloaded and refilled. Home he trotted without incident for he was well known and respected on the road. As John's father said, "He'd climb a man in a minute."

Once, boys at recess in front of the school he passed thought they'd have a little fun and throw rocks at him. On he trotted without even a side glance but when he decided he'd had enough, he stopped and set the basket down very carefully and like a flash streaked for the school yard. There were no boys to be seen. When the basket was set down, they knew it was time to move fast. When Mr. Farnsworth wanted to borrow a tool from John's father, he would say to the dog, "Go up to Mr. Thurston's and get a shovel. If they're using it, you come back home." When the dog returned without the shovel, Mr. Farnsworth got the message. Sometimes he would send him up for another tool. If faithful Figaro didn't see it in use, he would stay until John's father took him out to the barn and showed him all the implements. "Now, he'd say, "If you see what you want, take it." He'd pick up the tool Mr. Farnsworth wanted and away he'd go. Later, he returned it with a grateful wag of his tale. The neighbors said Mr. Farnsworth never had to do any runnin.

Water for the field hands was fetched in a two quart lard pail from the well on the farm across the road and it always arrived half full. Sister Vinny decided to see if Figaro could do a better job. While the neighbors watched, she filled the pail to the brim and gave it to Figaro. "Now, don't you spill it," she said. Figaro passed the test with flying colors and to this day no one has been able to figure out how he did it. Not one drop was spilled. A dog that couldn't do tricks wasn't worth his salt but a trick horse was in another class. Ed McKinley, who lived on the Swett's Hill Road, had a horse that could roll over and play dead. History has it that he'd lay there stiffer than a haddock and you'd swear to the lord he was dead. One of John's favorite horses in later years had a special place in his affections. He called her "A good old soul" because she never flinched at automobiles.

Horses, like elephants seldom forget. Mark Huckins once beat his nigh horse over the head because she couldn't pull a load of wood up a hill. John poked around in the snow with a peavey and found one of the runners caught on a stump, sawed it off and the sled went ahead. The next day at harness time, she laid her ears back, snorted and took down the

road, "Hell west and crooked" She didn't stop until she had reached a safe distance. It is doubtful if he was ever able to harness her again.

Grandma Hayes, who slept in a room off the kitchen, never knew when John came home late from the dances, a fact that irked her considerably. Spot the cat had solved the problem neatly by thumbing the latch on the shed door with her paw from the top of the grain bin so that the shed door was always open. Once John had slid the barn door back, lifted the inside bar with a knife between the door and the jamb, crossed the shed and gained the kitchen, he could easily reach his bedroom undetected provided he timed his steps with her snores.

Teeny, another cat, not as adventurous as Spot, always dined with Grandfather and Grandmother Hayes. She sat in Grandmother Hayes lap during the meal. When they finished, she poked her head over the edge of the table and lapped her saucer of milk.

Every winter a woodchuck holed up in the cellar wall. When the weather got very cold, John's father and his Uncle Ed Albert used to go down in the cellar, push away the rock that his hole and bring him up to the kitchen to warm up. When he sat up and whistled, they knew he was all right so they took him back to his hole and replaced the rock.

Only young limber horses could survive the hazardous winter logging in the Paugus Mountains. The logging road was covered with old meadow grass from the summit to the base. Two sleds were used with a team hitched to each one. Sometimes a chain was slung under the runners to reduce speed. A snub rope, the length of the road, wound on a windless at the summit pulled the empty sled up as the loaded one came down. The drivers stood ready to jump if the rope broke. When the bridle chain under the runners irked the horses, John often dispensed with it and crawled out on the tongue so that he could encourage the horses by talking to them on the steep descent. Steers were used in logging Norway spruce on Huckins Mtn for the mill in Gilbert's field. Plenty of patience, a few words of command and a goad covered with a rifle cartridge shell worked far better than angry blow.

This is the first lesson a good logger learns. Loggers and teamsters make good family men, Jim Welch, the famous High Sheriff of Carroll County, remarked in his memoirs. They have learned patience in dealing with oxen. Mr. Huckins was a little late in learning his when John jumped "straddle of him" and told him he would beat his face to a pulp if the steers came down the mountain with bloody noses again. Once on level ground, there were brooks to cross and in the deep of winter, bridges were improvised with small trees cut and laid across the stream. Alternating boughs of wet hemlock and snow were piled on top and left for a day to freeze into a solid bridge that lasted all winter.

Government farm inspectors who get chased by bulls with astonishing regularity could learn a thing or two from the old-timers who knew to the second when a bull was "going to show fight" and how to handle him. Mountaineers used a diversionary tactic by circling the bull and tossing a rock. In John's case, Uncle George Hayes' bull, "Butterball" was on top of a hill in the pasture. The second rock hit him on the horn and he straightened up and turned around. Just as he did so, John grabbed him by the tail, leapt onto his hocks and rode him standing on the gambrels down the hill. "I put the shillelagh right to him," John said, "and he made tracks right to the pasture bars. Then he turned again and let out a hoot and I let him have it. After that, I got off his hocks and lifted the bars. He was first one through."

Bears like bulls could be a problem especially at sapping time. "We don't mind their taking the maple sap," John said, "but the sons of guns never hang the buckets back." One bear that had had his fill of sap, holed up in a hollow tree only to be discovered by Grandpa Heard after he had felled it. Quickly, he walked up the tree trunk and dispatched him with his axe.

A house for sale in Freedom was believed to be haunted because strange noises were heard in it at night. No one dared go near it until one courageous Freedom man volunteered to spend the night there. The next morning he reported a chattering noise on the cellar stairs around midnight. With shotgun in hand, he crossed the kitchen and opened the cellar door just in time to see a rat with a clam shell clamped to his tail skittering down the cellar stairs. Putting two and two together, the Freedom folks figure out the answer. The owner of the house, fearful of a foreclosure sale, had conjured up a ghost with the aid of a rat to forestall the loss of his house.

One dark night, when John was walking along a wagon rut on the way home from Freedom, he heard something walking behind him on the opposite side of the road. Every time he stopped to listen the steps stopped. When he started walking again the steps kept pace behind him. Puzzled, he went on until suddenly something jumped out of the wall across the road and landed at his feet. He looked down and saw a lonely skunk.

On another night, he was walking along a dark road with a friend when they spied two eyes glowing at them in the darkness across the road. Was it a bobcat? This led to excited speculation until John, unable to contain his curiosity, darted up the hill while his companion took to his heels. Nearer and nearer he crept, his heart pounding. A shape loomed out of the darkness. What kind of a squatty beast was this that stayed motionless waiting for a stranger's approach? The eyes glowed brighter and brighter as John crept nearer waiting for the beast to spring. Then, before his astonished eyes, the beast turned into a stump and the eyes became two pieces of phosphorescent wood. Just the ticket for a pocket souvenir and great fun at the dances when everyone thought his pockets were "afire."

Another amazing discovery fell to John's lot when he was hauling fill for Charley Towle in the gravel pit back of Effingham Falls Cemetery. A sudden rumbling brought him up short. The men looked at one another in surprise. "Oh, it's just some rocks tumbling out of the bank," said Harold Mitchell, Freedom Selectman. John wasn't satisfied with this explanation and walked over to the bank to check. There, at his feet lay a human skull with reddish hair. "Come over here," he yelled. "This is the funniest looking rock I ever saw." "Well," said Charlie, after a long silence. "Guess we know what happened to the red-headed peddler. For years, the red-headed peddler had traveled the roads around Freedom and Effingham Falls. Everyone knew him. Suddenly, he had disappeared. The gossips were sure he'd been murdered. Apparently, he had been buried in a cemetery without bounds and the grave had been disturbed by excavation in the gravel pit.

A peddler, well known in Freedom before the first World War was called "Wolf" because he came on foot from Wolfeboro, 10 miles away, with a pack on his back filled with union suits and stockings for men and women. Later, he got an express cart that he hauled from town to town. "First thing we knew," said John, "he had him a hoss of about 1700-1800 lbs and he took better care of him than they did some of the folks in Freedom. If there was a mite of wind, he hung a hemp bag in front of him. Never trotted him in the world and he walked 5 miles or better an hour. "Wolf" built up a trade of regular customers and wore out 10 horses doing it but not one of them ever foundered from the cold.

The magazine subscription salesman was called "Little Pitcher". John never knew why but he thought it had something to do with his ears which were big enough to hear all the gossip he relayed from door to door. No doubt John's mother, like other Freedom housewives, welcomed a gossipy interlude in their endless sewing of trousers from "sale cloth" for the local storekeeper to sell. Their efforts to earn extra money were not made any easier by an eccentric storekeeper who delighted in teasing the busy housewives by insisting that a big shipment of needles they required was not available. When questioned, he usually replied with a twinkle in his eye, "We had to send them back because they didn't put any eyes in them." Often the thread, supposedly delivered, was missing and when the storekeeper called for the finished product and the housewife reported her dilemma, he always insisted that he had delivered the thread and then with a flourish, he would throw the door back and point to the thread where he had hidden it and query, sternly, "Is this the way you sweep your house?"

Life was also enlivened for the Freedom folks by the unconventional antics of the neighbors. Walter Cross and his wife lived on the Maine line which ran through the middle of their house and barn. When taxing time came around in the spring, Walter moved his stock and furnishing to the Maine side of the house and told the tax collector that he lived in Maine. Needless to add, when the Maine tax collector arrived, he found him living in New Hampshire.

Boundaries, at best, are difficult to determine in New Hampshire where lines are marked by old grown over roads and a tall pine or hardwood tree on the edge of a pond. Small wonder that a man can go "line crazy" as Mark Huckins' father did. History has it that when the line fever was on him, he would change the range lines, check the lines and every other kind of marker he could find. Fortunately, the Thurston's followed faithfully the first precept of a NH property owner: "Know your boundaries." Consequently, when Piper and McQuillan, the government surveyors, wanted to know who had been marking trees on the property, the Thurston's were able to solve the mystery. In the course of their careers,

government surveyors become understanding. "You can run all the lines you want Mr. Huckins", "but don't you chip another tree."

For some reason, still unexplained, several families on the Scarboro Road believed the world was coming to an end so they left their homes and camped out on top of Green Mountain. A few days later, the neighbors heard the horses stamping and neighing and the cattle lowing so they investigated and searched out the owners. They told them that if they neglect their stock again they would be thrown in jail. After some argument, they were persuaded to return to their homes to await the last trump.

A deeply religious resident in E. Madison believed that if Our Savior could walk on the water, he could. So, with boards the size of snow shoes, he tried to prove it. At the first step on Silver Lake, his feet came up out of the water and the curious onlookers pulled him out. Another rescue came down in history as a bona fide miracle. Frank Paul, who hauled logs out the pond for the mill always smoked a clay teedee pipe. The inevitable day came when he fell in and to the amazement of all the onlookers, lucky enough to be there, his pipe was still going.

In John's family, the miracle man, who could heal a cut by muttering an unintelligible charm and making the sign of the cross over the wound was Grandpa Heard. Of the four doctors who settled in Freedom, the Thurston's preferred Dr. George Lougee. Whenever called at the house, he always gave each one of the children a bottle of bright red checkerberry "medicine" and told them to take a spoonful every hour and that when it was gone they wouldn't need any more.

Perhaps the spirit of Freedom Folks can be best exemplified in the story of John's encounter with the U.S. Mail Inspector. "I wasn't afraid of God almighty in those days." John said by way of introduction. "My job was to drive the mail stage from the Post Office at Silver Lake where I picked up the mail to Madison Corner and from Madison Corner to the Post Office in Madison". "The Mail Inspector hailed me at Silver Lake for a ride. I told him it would be 25 cents to Madison Corner and cheap enough too. He said he wanted to go to the end of the route so I told him it would be 75 cents from Madison Corner to East Madison. He didn't make any fuss about it but after he got in he kept reaching for the mail bag. I told him to keep his hands off it but he didn't so the first thing he knew he landed right outside of the road." "If you want to ride to E. Madison, I said, you can set on your side of the seat and behave yourself. "I am the U.S Mail Inspector, he said." "Let the mail bag right alone," I said, If you want to inspect it, wait until you get to the Post Office." "The Inspector laughed but he waited." Later, the Inspector, who new John's Uncle George, thought the story to good to keep so he told Uncle George and Aunt Alfreda Hayes about it and said, "That feller, on the mail route, can take care of that mail bag, nobody's got to worry about it."

Or worry about Freedom folks either!

