

AT EAGLE POND FARM

.....
AN OCCASIONAL LETTER

July 2023

Eleven Ways of Knowing Summer

1.

After Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon came to live at Eagle Pond Farm and Jane began putting in gardens, summer began--whatever the date--when her peonies bloomed. Other flowers preceded them and followed them. But they were the ruffled glory that announced summer. Some years, weather indulged a long display. Some years it didn't. Then there were twelve months to wait for that suspense and reveal again.



Jane's peonies, *Festiva Maximus*. "Suddenly they've come into their full adult beauty," she writes, "the beauty of women, as Chekhov says, 'with plump shoulders' and with long hair held precariously in place by a few stout pins. They are white, voluminous, and here and there display flecks of raspberry red on the edges of their fleshy, heavily scented petals. / These are not Protestant-work-ethic flowers. They loll about in gorgeousness; they live for art; they believe in excess. They are not quite decent, to tell the truth. Neighbors and strangers slow their cars to gawk." "The Moment of Peonies," *A Hundred White Daffodils*.

2.

By the time of peonies, the return of the Red Sox had long heralded summer for Don. Now games ran late into the night. Over the years, the TV immigrated from the sitting room to the front parlor to accommodate them. A satellite dish was installed, then de-installed. Neighbors driving by in the dark would see, during baseball's rule, a single lit window and say, "Red Sox tonight."



In Don's study. A framed notecard showing Boston's Fenway Park is by P. J. Szufnarowski, n.d., published

by Art on Tour. As examples of Don's testaments to baseball, see his classic *Fathers Playing Catch with Sons* and "I Love My Dish," collected in *Here at Eagle Pond* (affirmed, as well, in *Life Work*, pp 39-40). And let the last two lines of Jane's "Afternoon at MacDowell," following the famous two, not go unnoticed.

3.

Before Jane and Don, summer was known to be soon when cows at the farm who had wintered in the barn were let out to graze on the steep flank of Ragged that rose behind the barn, back in those years when the slope was pasture and trees hadn't closed in.

Don's first memory of seeing his grandfather was when, after just turning four, he and his parents had driven north from Connecticut to the farm. Wesley was calling the cows for milking at the end of a day, "Ke-bo-o-o-osh, ke-bo-o-o-osh." See *String Too Short to be Saved*, pp. 126-27, and "Great Day in the Cows' House," *Old and New Poems* (1990).



Lithograph at second-floor stair landing: Mayer, Merkel and Ottmann, lithographers in New York City, 1869-1901. The c.1935 whirlybird that decorated Don's grandmother's gardens was deployed in Jane's, too.

4.

In the time of Don's great-grandparents, Lucy and Benjamin Keniston (who had moved down from higher on Ragged to buy the farm at Eagle Pond right after the Civil War), the start of summer brought city people, with their trunks and expectations, arriving by train (and often a last leg by stagecoach or wagon), to rusticate in the skirts of Ragged and Kearsarge at newly-built inns, mountain hotels, and farmhouses converted to lodging for boarders.



Stationmaster's desk, Potter Place.

For rural young women, these inns and boarding houses provided paid summer work as cooks, chambermaids, and housekeepers. Among them was Don's grandmother's older sister, Nannie, who was employed--along with chums of her age in South Danbury--at what was then the Red Gables Inn, now Pleasant Lake Inn, on Pleasant Lake in New London.



Bench in waiting room, lamp above ticket window, and winter stove at the Potter Place station, built in 1874, on the Boston and Maine railroad line between Boston and Montreal. Passenger service ended in 1962, but freight continued another twenty years. Preserved by the Andover Historical Society, the station is open to the public, along with related buildings, on weekends and other occasions, mid-May through mid-October (www.andoverhistory.org).

The same train that brought Victorian boarders to the area later brought Don from Connecticut for summers with his grandparents at Eagle Pond. He was nine when he first made the trip by himself. One stop beyond Potter Place, at the West Andover station called Gale, his grandfather would be waiting for him with horse and buggy.

Over time, some city boarders bought abandoned or failing farms as summer places. In those same years, other farmhouses and barns instead collapsed and reverted to sod. But in the 1980s, old farms and their old fields and pastures continued--in Andover, Wilmot, and Danbury--to largely define this place that Don and Jane had come to.

5.

Though summer's boarders came for New Hampshire's green breezes and the wrap of leisure and nature away from steamy cities, there were still days that needed an artificial assist.



A rice paper fan with bamboo ribs, found in the back chamber, is typical of the era--if not entirely adequate for an extremely hot day or hot kitchen.

6.

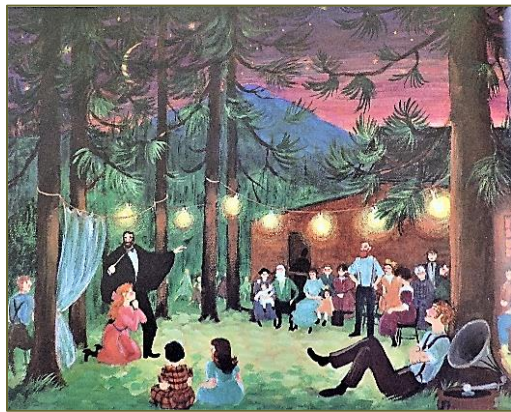
Lemonade was another remedy. Ice cut on Eagle Pond in winter became a welcome staple to fill glasses, once the insulating sawdust was rinsed from a cold block brought from the ice shed to the house, then chipped with a pronged ice fork.



The dangers of harvesting ice from the frozen pond were an accepted risk because, in summer, it kept a day's milk cool until delivery to the depot to be shipped by train to Boston or, in later years, until it was picked up by trucks owned by large dairies in Concord or Manchester.

7.

Don's mother, Lucy, remembered frequent summer picnics when she was growing up. But not only picnics. She and her middle sister, Caroline, joined other young people at the South Danbury church to rehearse and put on plays. The performances were held in "a beautiful, well-kept grove next to the Jenness house [in South Danbury]. The boys built a stage, we girls took care of the curtains. There were boards on logs for the audience to sit on."

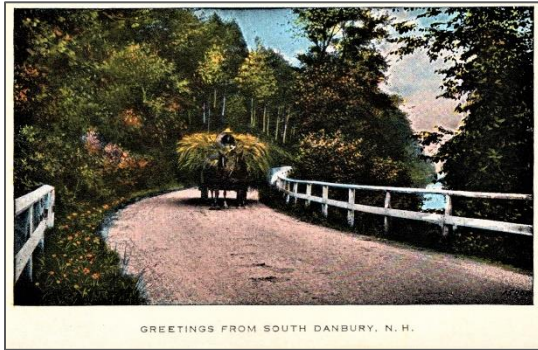


These entertainments are serendipitously corroborated by a picture book, *Pianna* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994), written by a neighbor, Mary Lyn Ray, and illustrated by Bobbie Henba. Vera Jenness (later Ford), one of several sisters and brothers in the family who lived there--called Anna ("Pianna") in this story that *she* recollected--describes train trips to Boston for piano lessons and these same plays staged in the pine grove beside her house. Though neither author nor illustrator had known of Lucy's recollections, the story told to them by Vera matches almost exactly. Art © Bobbie Henba.

8.

Then came high summer. For Don's grandfather, Wesley Wells, it was haying. Following local custom, he supplemented the limited hayfields at Eagle Pond by buying distant fields attached to

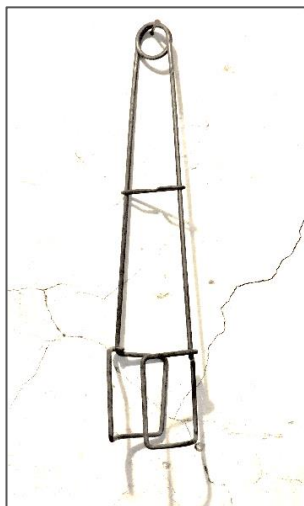
other farms or by exchanging the mowing of neighbors' fields for the hay. Land, then, cost little and was frequently, and casually, purchased just to acquire pasture or hayfields or woodlots.



A South Danbury postcard, dated 1930, shows a load of hay--laid up as Don and his grandfather laid up their loads--on its way to a barn. There were no square bales or round bales, only loose hay stacked on the hay rack. As they started home, Don wrote, "[i]t was the opposite of everything in Connecticut, to sit, sinking, in a pile of hay, while a bony old horse pulled a load of hay at three miles an hour. The smell of the hay was as great a pleasure as the softness of it, and I was full of the joy of haying." From "Haying, A Horse, and A Hired Man" in *String*. See also *Life Work*, pp. 85-89.

9.

For Don's grandmother, Kate, high summer was canning. His mother remembered Kate starting seeds for tomatoes and cabbage in March, using the wooden boxes that Gorton's codfish came in. Other seeds for the vegetable garden in front of the barn went directly into the ground. Wesley, with help from Freeman Morrison, kept the garden tended and weeded.



The kitchen Glenwood and tongs for lifting canning jars.

"As soon as fruits and vegetables were ready," Lucy said, "canning and preserving started"--continuing into the fall. A copper laundry kettle, large enough to hold three dozen jars and fit over two lids of the Glenwood, was used to sterilize the jars, then process them. "I always thought the worst part was getting jars washed and scalded, ready to pack [them]." This is how cellar shelves were filled for winter.

10.

For Jane and Don, high summer was pond afternoons.

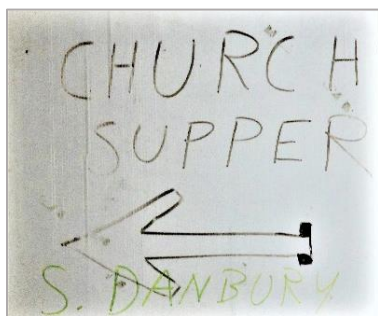


Eagle Pond is across the road from the house, below a sloping hayfield (sometimes it seems that everything at the farm slopes: porch, yard, fields, old pasture). The railroad tracks for the Boston and Maine's Northern line that bisected the field, still in place in Jane's and Don's summers, have been removed and the corridor converted to a popular trail. Beyond the tracks, a steep bank dropped to the pond and the small beach, behind a scrim of birches and pines, that Don and Jane made there (now grown over).

In July and August (until the week when a chill returned), afternoons at the pond were their daily routine. These were hours for dozing and vacancy and absorbing sun and place. Later, they might enter poem or prose but the pond was not for working.

11.

High summer was also the supper and auction at the South Danbury church. Tents shaded tables from late western sun. Neighbors gathered and people from farther away, who knew the annual spread, lined up with them.

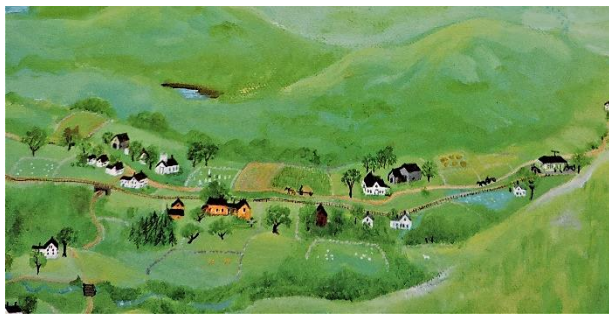


Demonstrating the same economy of other generations' saved string, all year Jane's sign remained in the back shed between Eagle Pond kitchen and woodshed, then was brought out again in July. Faded now by some thirty-plus years, it has outlasted the suppers. Photograph of the line, Linda Wilson, c. 1990.

"Wedges of pie on their paper plates cover one whole end of the canopied trestle table: lemon meringue, pecan, blueberry, apple, peach, --chocolate cream, raspberry . . . Every crust is crimped in a different way, the sign of authentic pie. There are baked beans--again every pot different,

made with all sizes, shapes, and colors of beans. I've noticed that people have passionate opinions about beans. / There's a big basket of homemade raised rolls, and brown bread that's been steamed in coffee cans; there are salads of every hue; casseroles--the obligatory macaroni and cheese, tuna fish, brown rice with tofu, a pan of lasagna big enough for a regiment; homemade ice cream--cherry, grape nut, coffee; and milk, or ice water, or strong coffee to drink." From "South Danbury Church Fair" in *A Hundred White Daffodils*.

Then? Inexorably, the word Jane used every year, summer kept on to its end and brought what post-summer brings. But always there were Kearsarge and Ragged, there was the pond, there were poems and prose to get onto paper. There were invitations to read faraway and nearby, there was travel. But, always, always, there was the knowing that home, unlike seasons, was a constant at Eagle Pond Farm.



Detail from *Pianna* (see 7), showing depot, Boston and Maine railroad tracks, Eagle Pond, the farm, the South Danbury church, and the shelter of Ragged. Art © Bobbie Henba.

Making Gardens at The Farm

"Sensible people grow green beans," Jane said. "I grow peonies, campanula, roses, lilacs, astilbe, bee balm. No matter how many flowers, there are never enough, and I harbor Napoleonic tendencies toward floral expansion." From "The Phantom Pruner" in *A Hundred White Daffodils*.



So plantings multiplied. "All winter," Don observed, "I find Jane standing by the dining-room

windows, looking into the secluded garden she has made behind the house; all winter she plans next summer's back garden. All summer she works every day that it does not rain, and sometimes she works in rain. . . . On late warm evenings of June and July, only darkness forces her inside. She gardens twelve hours a day, some days." *Life Work*, p. 33; *The Best Day, The Worst Day*, pp. 225-26.

Kate Wells also favored flowers. But her gardens weren't studied. They happened wherever she could find a place to plant something. Her annuals were mostly petunias and zinnias, morning-glories around the woodshed door, and window boxes across the front of the porch. Few of her perennials are remembered by name, though some of them--irises, old roses, and Golden Glow that neighbors shared with neighbors--continue to hold forth.



"Mother had so much to do in the house," said Lucy, "she never did anything outside--except to plant and take care of her flowers. She never seemed to spend a lot of time--a few minutes at a time most anytime of day, early in the morning or while Dad was milking in the evening."

Since the farm was sold in 2019, Sandra Rock, a close neighbor and indefatigable Master Gardener, has been donating her time and strong back to look after the gardens, as well as field edge, forest edge, and invasives (poison ivy, bittersweet, knotweed) with help from members of the Wilmot garden club and Wilmot conservation commission. Once outside repairs to the house are done (once there's money to address those), Sandy will oversee restoration of Jane's plantings and some expansion of the gardens. For now, focus is on preserving and tending--and enjoying--what still blooms in place.

The national Master Gardener program, administered in New Hampshire by the University of New Hampshire Extension services, offers training and certification for volunteers who donate their impressive knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm for gardening--and what extends from gardening--to the larger community through a broad range of public projects. We are grateful that Eagle Pond Farm is a beneficiary.

Another Master Gardener involved at the farm is poet Jeeni Criscenzo, recently transplanted from California to New Hampshire, who is preparing an annotated index of references to flowers, plants, gardening, and thoughts about gardening in Jane's poems and prose--not just for a list of plants or single lines but also as a way of considering how gardening informed Jane's life and her writing. Watch for more about this as Jeeni continues.

Meanwhile . . .

if any friends who live near enough would like to help Sandy with weeding or brush trimming, or can donate a woodchipper for part of a day, please send us an email to let us know: at.eagle.pond@gmail.com. You don't need to be a Master Gardener!



.....

Except as noted, all photographs © At Eagle Pond, Inc.
If you would like to unsubscribe, please contact at.eagle.pond@gmail.com
Previous newsletters are now archived at our website.

At Eagle Pond, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit established to preserve the farm where poets Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon shared a writing life, as well as to honor their work, open the house to the public, invite reflection on poetry and place, and provide residencies where poets and others can take up their own work.

**Your support, daily put to use for these purposes, is what ensures we can keep on.
Donations can be made at www.ateaglepond.org or sent to the post office box below.**

.....

AT EAGLE POND, INC. P. O. Box 452 WILMOT, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03287

WWW.ATEAGLEPOND.ORG AT.EAGLE.POND@GMAIL.COM