

A RIVERSIDE VILLAGE
AT THE TURN
OF THE CENTURY

Wiscasset, Maine, in 1900

By

Lawrence A. Averill

The falling street drops gently down the hill
To the railroad tracks that lace the river edge
In steel embroidery, then zeros in
Its narrowing way against the wooden bridge
That bears a slow-paced traffic in and out
To fill and drain the torpid village scene.
The Street is treeless, without vizoring
From summer glare, or shelter from the smite
Of winter blizzarding. Lugubrious street—screened out
And pokey after dark, uncharted, bleak
Except for tiny islands on the walks
Beneath the feeble rays of kerosene
That gloom in checkered patches through the panes—
Unsoftened like the old men—or half of them—
Behind the counters, crippled by the years,
Pre-calculating the weight of a pound of tea
And squinting through their steel-rimmed spectacles
At the balance's elusive teetering,
Yet softening the other half of them
Whose faces frame like old daguerreotypes
In their cluttered windows, velveted
By pink patina, giving the lie to time.

Along both sides of Main Street the low facades
Of unassorted wooden buildings fawn
Like older poor relations meekly squatting
Apologetic midst their younger kin—
Younger and more well-to-do and harsher-miened—
That stare down on them from the bricked eminence
Of three disdainful stories proudly set,
Half-minded to disown them if they could
But only half succeeding in the feint
Of blinding all appraising passers-by.

Main Street is laid out wider than need be
For the narrow, still unmotored trafficking
As though the men that planned it anciently
Had premonition of a horseless age
To speed tomorrow through the sleepy town
When gigs and pungs and buggies quit the street
To idle away a mellifluous old age
In cobwebbed lofts and half-unroofing sheds
Or left to oxidize behind old barns,
And when the slow motive power of ox and horse
Steps up to steeds that prance to internal combustion.

But that will wait upon tomorrow's day:
It is not yesterday's, nor yet today's.

Today, a few half-dozing horses stand
In somber resignation to the age
Beside the ponderous granite hitching-posts
That toadstool from the uneven sidewalks' curbs,
Stamping and pounding and switching lazily
At the black flies tormenting their quivering flanks
Without troubling to blink themselves awake.
An occasional beast more thoughtfully provendered
Snorts up a froth-dyed, spangled feeding-bag
In eager effort to suck the last oat
Into his drooling mouth.

Half down the hill,
In welcome trespass on the arid street
The watering-trough mirrors the hot noonday sun
Against the moss-green pump a man's head high,
Its upraised handle poised for replenishing
Of cooling draught for thirsting ox or horse
That strain rebelliously at rein or goad
And sidestep their parched way to sweet refreshment—
Or pail-bearing women of Samaria
Who though the well be deep need nothing more
To draw with than a firming handle grip.

Full shoulder-high to the storied aristocrats
A line of sturdy poles runs shattering by

To bring into the village on their wires
The world—impersonal and personal—
To unspigot it from Jotham Burnham's sounder
On the chattering second floor of the Sibley Block:
The impersonal in translation to be lost
Or rendered free to any who drop in
For a chew of Spearhead or a friendly smoke
Or for unfriendly diatribe about Senator Calhoun,
Or Moses Berryman, the derelict,
Or the soaring price of lobster at eleven cents;
The personal scrawled on a tattered envelope
And messaged half way down the hill or up
In Jotham's urgent fingers, while inside
The absent-minded sounder chatters on
In Yiddish jargon to the heedless bourgeoisie.

Waist-high below the brick aristocrats
In front of Rodney Kimball's pharmacy
An ancient mortar and pestle clambers up
Against the scaling paint of the facade,
Arresting symbol of the dark remedial arts
And all mysterious concoctions mixed within—
Less often from Dotor Sloane's prescription pad
Than the prophylactics of the village's old wyves—
Still less from popular nostrums: "Rodney's Own",
Unlisted in *Materia Medica*.

A dozen other shops on either side
Are personalized by a rash of swinging signs
Scarce legible from the erasing winds and sleet
Of half a century of slow defacing years
That blow up from the Harbor's tallying.

Above them all, and carefully redone
For the enticement of faltering customers
Advancing with their swollen jaws agrip,
A lurid pennon waves its staggering claim
That Doctor Harlow practices a painless skill
Not to be equalled in Portland or elsewhere.
Illuminated in brilliant caricature,

The smiling Doctor Harlow brandishes
A three-pronged molar bedded in his tongs
With gnarled and twisted roots before the gaze
Of his astonished victim couched
Half-sensible beneath the dentist's knee.

Shabbiest among the Main Street brood
Of poor relations skimpily wedged in
Is Samuel Latham's dwarf-sized barber shop:
One might walk past it quite unwittingly
But for the cracked and peeling barber pole
And a dingy, spidered window underneath
That frames the artist and his yellow hound
With one eye closed, the other mildly ajar
As Samuel flourishes a final professional touch
Above the locks of the Honorable Joseph Pell,
Due back in Legislature Monday next
As he announces with a fine élan.

The Pemberley Liquor Store—more tolerable
To a degree among the poor relations
Is lamped beneath a sturdy post outside
And reinforced by sputtering wicks within
To light directionally good feelings' mart:
A popular rendezvous, flanked handily
By a stout and dual-purpose hitching rail
To anchor first the tarrying vehicles
And afterwards embrace the amorous men
Before they dare assay the carriage-step.
Within the window, on the darker side
You sense the clever versatility
Of the dispenser of the village cups
Whose bench and lasts are cramped against the pane,
For he does more than pour the foaming mugs
By practicing the cobbler's needful art,
Though mostly unrenewed the same old taps
Tap their way out that tapped it sprightlier in.
The urgent need of the cobbler's clever skill
Anon is cited in many a village home
To set at rest a wife's suspicioning

That a man is being drawn by unholy thirst
More than hole-y soles to Pemberley's.

A stoutly-wheeled, low-hung delivery cart
Loose-traced behind his slow and ancient steed
Waits idly out in front of Barnaby's
Which is hardly more than a yawning hole
In Doctor Harlow's basement: Seth Barnaby.
The village's kindest man—or one of two—
His brow has never crusted through the years;
His deep-set eyes see only goodness, while
His heart dispenses only it in kind.
Whenever Seth gees Pegasus from the rail
And backs him into Main Street, errand-bent,
A bevy of crowding children climbs aboard
The rattling cart, to ride atop the freight,
And the driver smiles agreeably at them
Just as he did in long-ago yesterdays
At their fathers and mothers. In chirpy jargon then
He snaps the reins on waking Pegasus
And the lurching carry-all sways up the hill
Exactly as of yore from the tightening hames
Of an earlier Pegasus, revived
By the silken lash of the chirruping.
Seth Barnaby—the village collection-man,
Collector of ashes, papers, cans,
Collector and dispenser of all commodities,
Mover of families and their household goods,
Back stooped beneath the village burden's weight
Shouldered and unshouldered down half a century,
His bushy hair unkempt and scraggly
As though to match the scarcely shaggier mane
And fetlocks of his faithful Pegasus.

Amasa Turner, bland proprietor
Of the Village Hardware—and with Barnaby
The co-proprietor of merry juvenile hearts—
Unbent by eighty winters' buffetings,
White-haired, with matching whiskers half-awaist
Deep eyes aglow with the tint of autumn sky,

A busy man against his hardware screen,
Amasa Turner is as sensitive
As Barnaby to the children rippling
Across his threshold, jostling toward the scales
In noisy curiosity. His scoop is dropped,
Or his gnawing scissors pause mid-sheet of the zinc,
Or a fist of nails falls jingling to the keg,
Or a searing diamond idles on the glass,
While waiting customers frown grumbling
As Uncle Masa serves the childish throng
Around the scales in breathless eagerness
For an interpretation of the hieroglyphs
That ride the unsteady arm. His rendering
Regardless of the spindling or the plumping
Of the expectant customer is stereotyped,
Being without benefit of reading glass
That hangs superfluously from a snarl of twine
Across his breast. "Just forty-seven pounds!"
And most of them are duly satisfied.
They troop away in freshly rising glee
To publicize their poundage hither and yon—
Though some of them grow mildly skeptical,
Like Ellen Farman who repeats today
Upon the scale her yesterday's avoirdupois—
And last week's, and last year's it well may be.
Today she carries in concealing hands
Behind her back two verifying stones
And leaves the place a seared iconoclast.
But doubtful Ellen will be back next day
With all her friends, un-rocked but skeptical
Of errant scale and errant scaleman's guile.

In broad daylight a burning lantern swings
Above the shuttered doorway of the Law
To light the walk to Amos Wetherbee's
That searchers otherwise might fail to find
And so his strong box catch no usuries.
The Village Counsel, Justice of the Peace,
Pawn-broker, money lender, barrister—
Gaunt, spare, high-collared, devious,

Subtle, penny-pinching, needle-sharp,
The jurist crouches over his high desk
In half-absorption in the latest Acts
And Resolves, and half in dark preoccupation
With this or that approaching client's need
Of shelter in his piebald mantle's folds.

Half-pedigreed, Elias Lawton's store
Pragmatic afterthought of the architect
Juts off obliquely from the storied Milton Block.
Gunnysacked grain for far-pastured animals
That graze in summer on the grassy hills
And broad green fields—in winter, stanchioned snug
In cozy tie-ups of contented barns—
Reels bag by bag on husky farmers' backs
Down the broad steps of Lawton's Flour and Feed
To pyramid in lurching carts or pungs
Far out across the rolling countryside
To listening mouths in barns and sties and folds.
Less often down the rutted wooden steps
Elias strides his course disdainfully,
Two hundred weight of barreled flour borne
Upon his massive chest, to fling its bulk
With the grand flourish to the sagging springs
Of a buggy waiting at the hitching-rail.

Upon the opposite corner of pedigree
The crowded store of Ezra Mortimer
Displays its wares. Ill-natured purveyor
Of men's apparel, Ezra hovers close
To an indifferent coal-stove set mid-floor.
Though hopeful of patronage, he turns him now and then
To peer appraisingly through his grimy panes
At passing grist for his sartorial mill.
Each male upon the hoof as he walks by
Is scrutinized methodically. Here
Is one whose seat gnaws briskly at the patch
Sewn on by thrifty helpmeet. Here is one
Whose ulster shows the shredding of the years.
Coater, panter, shirter to the village men

And their cousins alike from the sprawling hinterland,
And tailor to their gross anatomies
In his Fashion Store for Men the artist plies
His tape and needle, though professionally
His taking in or letting down of some
Can scarce be called professional, albeit
The service goes gratis with the merchandise.
On one of his adaptations, now and then,
A port-side trouser leg bells loudly out
Like a sailor's, while the starboard hugs the knee
Like a mounted jockey's, or a coat hangs skewed
Like Ichabod Crane's, or fits its man too snug
Like Wilkins Micawber's. Yet the tailor stands
Unmoved, unchallenged through his fitting years.
Though Ezra is himself more satisfied
With Ezra than are half his clientele,
By reason of remote geography
There is no competition for his skill.

Next door to Ezra's Fashion Shop, a sign-
Time-eaten like the medico within—
Earmarks the office of Willard Sloan, M.D.
An earlier day once was when Doctor Sloan,
Important always, always pressed for time
As he would have it widely understood,
Hitched up his skittish sorrel mare
To stir with a great dash of showiness
The startled dust through Main Street's gaping length
To demonstrate the press of his affairs—
Though scarcely was such lather warranted.
Those days now past, the sorrel mare farmed out,
The pompous doctor, victim of the Age,
Has transferred himself and his pouch of medicines
To a Stanley Steamer's unpredictableness:
First self-propelling vehicle ever seen
And gaped at on the sleepy village street,
And from its lofty perch makes fresh fanfare.
In place of the equine drool of yesterday
Behind him spew white rising vaporous clouds.
But he is well protected by the folds

Of a white linen duster fluttering
And thick-lensed goggles riding on his nose
With deep solemnity. Like Mortimer,
The doctor thinks most flatteringly of himself—
Far more so than detracting neighbors do:
'Old Saw-Bones!' 'Doctor Pill!' 'That dev'lish fool!'
'I wouldn't have him in if I was dying!'
Small gratitude for his obstetrical services,
He having delivered all of them, as well
As all their offspring. Yet the man of skill,
Serene and lofty in his unconcern,
Benignly unaware of all the slandering,
With stout black case and duster-clad strides forth
From his office door and blows his Stanley steam.
At his vaporous passing, many look and frown;
Some kow-tow, with a show of deference
For sooner or later all will take his pills.

Among the poor relations in a busy shop—
More tolerable for its indispensability—
Amasa Blair weighs out his lard and tea;
Carves wilting mounds of butter from his tubs;
Grinds coffee in a mill that towers high
Above his burnished head; whets a sharp knife
To slice through quartered sows and beeves and lambs
For the housewives, and for their children extirpates
From stiffening hogs the coveted bladder balloons
To dry and charge with half a dozen beans
Before inflating; or measures out for them
Rolled lozenges and licorice, chocolate drops,
Round Carthaginian balls and taffy-on-a-stick.
They weigh decisions at the candy case
As shrewdly as Amasa at his scale.

A fading scutcheon marks the Grand Arcade
Of its brisk proprietor—Eliza Grant—
The only female merchant in the town,
With but the sulky aid of her helpmeet, Lemuel.
A chronic grumbler, Lemuel—in deep lament
Of his sad lot entombed in merchandise:

Despiser of all menial businesses,
Despiser of himself as one enslaved
To them—all-round complainer at his lot,
At war with everybody and everything,
Enamored of Charles Garvice's cock and bull
And Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's rhapsodies
And of all the melodramatic novelists:
Romanticist by dime-novel tutelage,
Lover of what-is-not, but ought-to-be,
Yet bearing up indifferently well
Beneath the yoking to his servitude.
Eliza takes him patiently in stride
And humors him with small indulgencies
Admixed with tolerant purrs: "Oh, Lemuel!"
Which fail to break the locks that hold him chained
And sighs himself with grumbling to her tasks.

As Main Street drops serenely down the hill
Descending to the bridge, it eases past
The last of the Village's aristocrats—
The rambling, lofty-storied Wilkins Block:
Across the front, in foot-high lettering,
'Fred Wilkins, Oars & Oakum, Rigging, Pitch'
And scarcely less imposingly below
'Fine Shoes & Leggings, Rubbers, Rubber Boots.'
Shrewd caterer to the town and water-front,
Providing round his roaring air-tight stove
An inviting rendezvous for lobstermen
And seiners, in from dories, weirs and traps
That buoy and bob the winding river's length—
And for off-duty hands and river-men
In from the puffing little river craft
That serves the towns from the village to the sea—
And crewmen from the mammoth 'Governor King'
That paddle-wheels a smoky, fog-drenched way
To the meeting ocean, duly Boston-bound
On every second afternoon at six
And every second morning warped again
Into the village berth once more at six.
A rendezvous less often—though as sure—

For long-absent bearded men before the mast
And blue-capped skippers from their vessels in
From the coastwise trade and the further Caribbean,
From Liverpool, and Rio, Marseilles
And the distant ports along the South China Sea.
A pungent mingling dyes the atmosphere
Of Wilkins's on a cold autumnal dusk—
Too early to close, too late for customers:
The dangling fumes of stale tobacco smoke—
The acrid, earthy smell of pitch and tar—
Of ulsters, reefers, oilskins drying out
In orderless sprawl along the old settee
All steaming redolently in the balmy heat—
The body scent of a dozen lounging men
A-reek with mildly stewing idleness—
Of slowly inundating cuspidors
Their sawdust target oftener off the range than on:
These all commingle with the smells of merchandise—
Rubbery, leathery, oily, resinous.
The Wilkins conversation is frothy, too—
Provocatively raw and maggotty
And always scandalizing to the women folk
Who bring their children in for shoes for school,
For rubbers, leggings, boots with copper-toes
To stand the dragging as they belly-bunt
Across the crust and down the icy hills.
Alerted always for the female trade,
Fred Wilkins eyes the pane with weather orb,
His lips well-loaded for a shrill "Sh-h-h! Sh-h-h!"
That will forestall embarrassment for all
Provided he can sight the approaching face
In time to expectorate his warning blast.

Mose Berryman, the village ne'er-do-well
Draws deeply on his corn-cob with the rest:
To every seaman hail-fellow-well-met, he
In part because his flavor is still salt
And reminiscent of his flavorful years at sea,
In part because his pleasantries ashore
In recent time are of a feather with their own

When on red-lettered ship day's noisy leave
In orgies at Maracaibo or the Port of Spain,
LeHavre, Tripoli or Malaga—
In Colombo, Rangoon, Hong Kong, Shanghai,
Mose Berryman, the village derelict
Fits smoothly in the seamen's ribaldry.

And so Main Street descends across the tracks
To fuse with the high-pilinged wooden bridge
That wheels the outer world into the town
And out of it in slowly-measured pace
As life flows metrically down a mellow age.
In the Village, as in congealing kaleidoscope,
The flow is flowless and the tide stays slack:
Today is not transformed by yesterday
And of tomorrow gives no presaging,
There is no chorus to the theme of Life,
No change of motionless pace, no overtones
To stir the soul, no sounding bugle's call
Save when the Congo bell tolls requiem
And Enoch Webster's hearse jolts through the gate
Of Pleasant Cemetery. There the crowding stones
Of the poor relations and the pedigreed
Cohabit amicably enough as once they did
In Main Street's shops, with no distinctiveness
Save more imposing reminders for the one
Who peer down from their marbled sepulchres
Upon the others' less intrusive stones.

EDITOR'S NOTE

On September 17, 1973, we received the following covering letter for the poem printed above from Dr. Lawrence A. Averill of Wiscasset, Maine:

Gentlemen:

"I am making bold to send along to you herewith a manuscript which you may care to use in the Newsletter. The narrative depicts a scene as it was in Wiscasset, Maine, seventy years ago in my boyhood. The somewhat unusual style for a bit of history has been used as appropriate to convey a nostalgic impression that survives still in many oldsters' reminiscences of a country village.

While the general setting and atmosphere of Main Street have been accurately reproduced in this narrative, as they existed three-quarters of a century ago or thereabouts, names of buildings, stores and individuals have been changed. Present-day oldsters whose memories can go back far enough will be able to identify many of them. A few fictitious characters have been added to round out the nostalgic poesy of a colorful drama of long ago.

In the hope that you may find the manuscript an interesting departure in its format from the traditional prosaic style, I would be most happy if you cared to include it in the Newsletter."

*Dr. Averill has been a prolific contributor to journals and periodicals of all sorts. He is remembered fondly by many in Maine and elsewhere for his delightful book *Pie For Breakfast* written in the early fifties with his wife Marion.*