

*HOW THEY CELEBRATED THE FOURTH
IN SHEEPSCOT VILLAGE*

Seventy-Five Years Ago

Thursday, July 4, 1901

by

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Resplendent vision! Bold American dream
Of Liberty and Equality, under God!
The Nation knew the strength of stalwart men
In toil and sacrifice and agony
Of War, with interwoven times of peace and calm
With fulsome mead of joy and brimming hearts!

But pause we now to muse on earlier time
In the Middle Years, before the sombre days
Of lethal wars across the pitying earth
That tortured human souls and human hearts—
When there was drumbeat of a simpler life
Now long corroded by the gory stains of Mars!

The sleeping village awoke to the pigmenting
Of July dawn, encarnadined with pink
That stippled hills and woods and the hamlet roofs
And bathed in molten gold the River's blue
Lustring the weathered arms of the Paul Revere
On the Methodist steeple in drifting matinal search
For the first faint stirrings of the new day's breath:
As when long ages since the Creator paused

To smile at what his hand had wrought
And cry exultingly that all was good!

The mantel clock downstairs droned 'five'
On the scalded ears of the waking lad
Who, in a trice, was out of his bed
And in two more was trousered and clad.
"I knowed they's forget all about it!" he fumed
As in a fury he dashed for the stair:

"You 'd think this was any old day like the rest
Instead of the Fourth! — Everybody'd be up and dressed
If them British was comin', as they did once before
Right over our ploughed-land and banged on our door!"

He ran for the corner
With one gallus a-wag
And shirt-tail half tucked
To snatch up his swag
Of canes and torpedoes
And crackers in chain
To wake up each sleeper
And rattle his pane:
And if that didn't do it
He had in his store
The giant twelve-incher
That would rouse them for sure!

But a hand on his gallus
And one firm in the twist
Of his shock of brown hair

He could not resist:
"Come, swallow your breakfast—
(How crazy it seemed)
Your pettijohn's hot
And sugared and creamed:
For a boy without breakfast
No one can deny
Will soon peter out
Though it's Fourth of July!"

"Come, son! Mind your mother!"—
No help from his pop,

So he scuttled his dander
And filled up his crop!

Then out through the door,
Noise-makers in train,
He raced for the Church
At the head of the lane.

"If I only can get there
Sooner'n that Hank,
I'll grab that old bell-rope
And give it a yank
That'll warn all the people
They'd better turn out
And shoot at them Redcoats
And put them to rout!"

So up the broad platform
And behind the dark stair
He grabbed for the bell-rope
But no bell-rope was there,
For the crotchety old Sexton,
As so often before,
Had pulled up the bell-rope—
Coiled now on the floor
Far up in the tower
Out of reach of bad boys
And save all good people
From their racket and noise.

"Two can play your old game,"
Scoffed the lad as he climbed
Far up in the tower
All cobwebby and grimed.

Half-way to the bell-deck
He reached for a round
But instead of the ladder
A foot dangling he found:
A foot and an ankle,
Then a leg and a knee
As the voice of another
As tricky as he

Came down through the rafters:
Triumphant with glee:
“Hey! Le’ go my leg
And climb up here with me!”

In a moment the still
Of that soft morning air
Was turned into bedlam
As the rollicking pair
On the wild-swinging bell
Without rhythm or pause
Proclaimed the GREAT FOURTH
Through its harsh iron jaws.

Thus got into action
That far Holiday,
Till the tumult expanded
From the Town to the Bay,
While from first streak of dawn
To the coming of night
The youthful contingent
Got their fill of delight:
Toy-cannons, stone-muzzled,
And firecracker-breeched
They blasted tin-cans
With clamor and screech.
Scared horses reared up
In pasture and stall
Alert to the danger
Wher’e’er it might fall!
All the dogs in the village
Slunk tail-dropped away
Under sheltering porches
To escape the melee;
And house-cats in terror
Ran off from their milk
To find safer refuge
From this torturing ilk;

While the hens and the roosters
Scrambled over each fence
In wild-ogled terror
To seek self-defense:

And even the cormorants
A-fish in the Bay
Abandoned their diving
And flew squawking away,

More formal observance of the Holiday
Begins at ten. Along the village street—
Unpaved, unspoiled by hurried trafficking
Of a motor age as yet in embryo.
Today its usual languor is thrust off,
For every man and woman, boy and girl
Is either sidewalked in expectancy
Or marching in formation in the line.
There are no 'horribles' in Sheepscot Town:
It is too small, and much too far removed
From Portland and Tomorrow for revelry;
And mayhap still too mindful of the past
To mar the picture of its hero years.

The march is headed by a drum and fife.
Not pitched too neatly for the melody,
But the players' shoulders beat a brisk tattoo
Thus adding rhythmic measures of the heart.

Comes then the Marshal in an ancient gig,
A stolid veteran of the Civil War,
In fading uniform and Corporal's Cap,
With one arm folded on his narrow chest
The other left behind at Gettysburg.
Six younger soldiers of the Spanish War
Walk single-file behind the Corporal—
Brisk in their youth and serious of mien,
The leader bearing high their battle-flag,
The others arrow-straight in fair salute.

The pupils from the District School are there,
An ill-assorted company of forty-three
Scoured and fresh in their go-to-meeting suits
In reasonable order, marching as to war,
Though some there are that deem it all a lark—
Clowning and arguing their way along
While scandaled mothers glower from the sides

And scowl ten seconds of tranquility
Among the wayward till they pass from sight.
A group of Church folk follows in measured step
In dual march, hymn-singing as they go.

Two dozen husky farmers, freed today
From their seasonal labor in the summer fields,
Bring up the rear, with hoes and rakes and forks
And bear with pride their shouldered implements
With the other marchers, for this is Holy-Day.

Along the length of the narrow Village street
The line moves past the shuttered grocery
And Johnson's Flour and Feed, today swept clean
Of idle oldsters who make their hang-out there
Freed from home and fussy women folk,
Indulge their Spear-Head, Sickle and T. D's—
But who today, eyes heavy with unshed tears,
Sit in their doorways, thoughtful of the past.

Hilarity spreads among the marching host
As it bends westward to the Sheepscot bridge
With its lofty toll-board, lettered unevenly,
Apprising all who pass the collector's post
That men-afoot must pay for the privilege
A hard-earned penny from their meagre store,
A tuppence if they ride in phaeton,
With lesser tax for crossing sheep and goats.
But today the official's door is tightly closed
For 'tis Holiday: there'll be not toll
And the marchers pass exultingly across,
Laughing and hooting at the silent board
In clamorous tempo to the other side of town
To reform there: then travel back again
In merriment at the freedom of the bridge.
How strangely like the freedom of the Land,
They muse, whose gates stand open to everyone
To go and come whene'er and where he will!

For half an hour the spectacular parade
Holds central interest of the citizens
Before it breaks its ranks and gathers close

About the speaker's stand, set for the day
By would-be carpenters on a grassy slope
Hard by the Church.

A strip of bunting looped
In scalloped beauty round the official stage,
With the Stars and Stripes a-flutter in the breeze
Aloft in the middle scene. The Speaker of the Day
Is flanked on either side by the Selectmen, clad
In stiff formality to grace the day
In their Sunday-best, with collars, cuffs and ties
Contrasting sharply with their workaday
Of farmers' dull-toned frocks and overalls.

The Country Doctor, oozing dignity,
Felicites the Villagers for their zeal
And the patriotic valor of their folk;
Then, bowing low, presents to the awe-hushed crowd
A Wiscasset Lawyer, known for his eloquence
Before the law, and at Chautauqua stands.

—For three good years this Land has been at peace:
The roar of cannon and the clash of swords
Are silenced blessedly. From Atlantic's shore
To Pacific's shining strands the guns are mute:
From the Great Dominion to the Rio Grande
Our Nation rests from war, and may God grant
That through all coming years the peaceful arts
Now needful for a fast-expanding State
May nurture from tomorrow's quenchless breast
Rich sustenance for a deserved maturity!

—It was not ever thus: Long ages since
This Western Continent was held in fief
By Iroquois and Sioux and Algonquin
And many another tribe of Indian braves—
Cherokees, Cree and Southern Seminoles,
The storied Pueblos, Utes and Apaches
With savage rituals to bring the summer rains
And sprout their crops when the land was parched and dry,
With chant of Shamen to the spirit world
To heal their sick and bear away their dead
To animism's Happy-Hunting-Ground

Beyond the silent meadows and empty woods
In vaster meadows lost against the sky.

—A century and more before the pealing Bell
Rang out the Declaration, and throughout
The later shaping years of Destiny
The battle-cry of Redmen filled the air
And battle-axe and tomahawk dripped red
As they fought to hold their fiefdom of the Land
Against encroachment of the white man's sway,
Engaging now with English, now with French
In Virginia, Georgia and the Carolines
And westward to the Lakes and Canada
And the mighty Mississippi's trading-posts.

—Your own fair Sheepscot knew their savage wrath:
Was not this Village in the dark of night
Twice laid waste by their arrows red with flame?
Lives there a man— or boy— now gathered here
Who has not dug in a hundred cellar-holes
Within a mile from where you stand this day
Where twice your forbears heard the midnight cry
And fled their burning roof-tops: pawns of wrath?
Harsh days of terror! Aye, days, too, of strength,
Until the Land was wrenched from the foemen's grasp
And, behold! Past humble cabins thinly sown
The white men grimly slogged their muddy way
Along the snail-paced roads and unmarked trails
Crossing great rivers and skirting sky-lost peaks
Into the Ohio Country in groaning vehicles
To settle hamlets, pushing ever on
To the El Dorado of California's gold.

--Yet once again our fathers knew tyranny—
Not of Indians, but a challenging white host
From o'er the sea to quench our Liberty!
And when that sacred Bell of Philadelphia
Rang out defiance, see the patriots then
Springing to arms in the name of Freedom's God
Pledging their lives and fortunes eternally
Against oppression where'er its head was raised,
And ushering in a nobler Government
That has no equal on the planet Earth!

—A decade's bitter conflict with George the Third
Shall sever all allegiance to the British crown
And test the passion of Free Government,
Though it shake the Western world to its nether stones

As steel meet steel and sword draw mingled blood
Of Englishmen that are— and that are not:
At Clinton, Camden, Cowpens, Brandywine
The standards totter on the battlefields,
While in the fearsome conflicts on the seas
The ensigns flutter low or rear aloft.

—Surviving the wintry blasts of Valley Forge,
See fourteen thousand men with Washington
Sometimes in victory, sometimes defeat —
Though buoyed in hope by gallant Europeans—
Young officers forsaking tyranny at home
Brave the broad sea to bring to Freedom's men
Their gallant aid: Lafayette and Rochambeau
From France! From Poland, Kosciusko comes.
And Baron Steuben, weary of Prussian wars—
And others, braving their lot with the colonists
Until at last, on Yorktown's grim redoubts
Cornwallis bites the dust, and sails for home,
And the hero of the age, George Washington,
Becomes the first President of the United States
Amid the cheers and huzzahs of the multitudes.

—Through years of disagreement, sectional pride,
Financial stringency and congressional wrangling,
The Land survived, and grew in basal strength,
Though jealous States, unused to unity,
Sought to separate from the common weal
And govern independent of the rest.
There was division, too, on slavery
Between the Northern men of industry
And the souther planters, geared to the work of slaves
On the broad plantations ripening in the sun,
Though white men who had fled from serfdom's plight
To seek their freedom from eastern tyranny
In strange antithesis brought slavery's curse
To foul the glory of America!

— And so a Civil War between the States
Bleeds the new Nation dark with fraternal death
As half a million men lay down their lives
In bitterest fighting: From Fort Sumter's guns
To Mississippi's torture! Two Bull Runs,
With bloody Antietam, Chancellorsville,
And many another battle in the plains,
The hills and hollows of the suffering land.
The Great Emancipator— Lincoln— weeps
In agony, yet steels in fervent will
To save the Nation, and guard her precious soil
That Freedom may not perish from the earth.

—At last, the blood-seeped South lays down her arms
At Appomattox, while Lee's proffered sword,
Scarred by the bruise of war and suffering,
Is tendered back by the courtly hand of Grant
Who has no will to humiliate the foe
Of yesterday; but rather, to build with him
A bond of friendship among the warring states
And bind together the shreds of a goodly Land.
The soldiers of the lines stack their useless arms
And falter homeward through the wasting fields
To nurse their wounded and their broken lives
And bend once more to their neglected husbandry.

—So ends, good friends, the travail of the years
And so begins an area of blessed peace—
From the good Dominion along the quiet North
To the azure waters of the Rio Grande,
While on either side vast oceans intervene
Whose wildest floods can toss no longer threat
To tomorrow's brightening dawn of amity
On the far horizons of a peaceful world!—

But the day is far from ended. On the green
Thick-shaded by the elms behind the Church
The Holiday Feast prepares. Since break of dawn
When the tide was out, the men have dug the flats
And harvested three bushels of succulent clams
Which, now transported to a stone-built fireplace
In the middle scene, are sputtering in the bake

Of seaweed, with lobsters early drawn
From bulging traps along the fruited cove.
Now reddening in the bivalves' restless broth.

In the meantime, wooden tables have been snugly set
And now deep bowls of yellow-eyes dot the cloth,
For some will savor the old staple more than clams
The products of the kitchen outranking the flats
In many a loyal bean-grown son of Maine.
Dispersed among the beans are lofty cakes
Four stories high, with thick-frosted cupolas!
And foot-long jelly-rolls a-drip with fill,
Unliced, awaiting the calculating knives
Of the devouring hosts! Stout pies, two dozen strong,
Thick with apple, pumpkin, raisin, mince
In generous quarters ready for the fingers' reach!
A few red oceans of strawberries fresh from the fields
With billows of cream high-rising on the floods!
And pickles, apple-sauce and ketchup everywhere,
With bubbling pots of coffee on the rocks—
And, if any will besides the juveniles,
Two freezers stand, inviting to ice-cream!

Before the feast is ended, a new wasteland
Of shells and left-overs litters up the ground
In striking semblance to a battle-field
When peace has come, before the mop-up corps.
But it will have to wait, for a full half
Of the late invaders, propped against the elms,
Have succumbed to sleep that follows stiff warfare,
While the rest lie prone in the fragrant summer grass,
With tongues that scarce have strength to wag
Until they, too, doze off in yawning disregard
Of the battle waste of mounded residue.
That once was welcome to their hungry eyes
But now betokens later hill of toil
When the spirit moves, and duty calls them back.
An occasional cracker— miraculously left
From the morning trove goes off with sudden crack
To vex the sleepers and delight the boys
In final bursts of patriotic zeal.
An indecisive game or two of scrub,
Some horseshoe pitching and some fitful flies

Knocked out that only few have vim to glove—
Being far too indolent for such give and take.

The day is climaxed after darkness falls
With blazing fireworks at the riverside:
Whirring pinwheels circumscribe the pole
And sputtering Roman candles pierce the sky
As ball after ball shoots over the darkling waves
To light brief day among the festive crowd
While rockets soar above their following eyes
Depicting in the air George Washington
And Lincoln, Grant and Lee, and Uncle Sam
In full regalia.

Then at last 'tis over
And Sheepscot folk seek out their waiting beds
There is in every heart fresh glow of joy
And in every bosom a new serenity
And though unexpressed in lucid syllables
An inner warmth for their nativity.

But the same lively urchin
In the morning at five
By the moonlight's eleven
Is scarce half-alive!

With powder-burnt fingers
And bangs on his head
He stumbles upstairs
And falls dressed into bed!

In a moment his mother
Looks in at the door,
Kisses gently his freckles
And covers him more.

That Fourth of July, many decades ago,
Has left in life's twilight a lingering glow.
That shall not dim out though fresh wars will arise
To torture our land and blacken our skies,
For man will not learn the unwisdom of strife
In his little world that with hatred is rife:
But blest be our Land in humanity's name
That shall strive on Time's canvas life's beauty to frame!