CHAPTER XIX

POEMS AND BALLADS

• We hope the reader will get a chuckle or two, or perhaps a wave of nostalgia, from this brief sampling of poetry by Brookfield people.
• In the Historical Society files, Harold (Hal) Wheatley seems to have been the most prolific, and we have included several of his because they tell amusing stories of local people and customs. Hal Wheatley and his family summered in Brookfield for many years (see Neighborhood Memories section).
• Gertrude Bedell once lived in the present Spahn house; her poem bears witness to her fondness for this town.
• The short poem by Ray Perry is an example of many he wrote while in Brookfield, some of which were published in the Barre Times.
• Positive identification of the author is lacking for “Aunt Lizzie’s Coffin” and “Jasper Hodges,” taken from Historical Society files.
• Walter Wheatley of East Brookfield (see Wheatley history) wrote many pieces of poetry, we’re told; one is included here.
• Especially during the 19th century, many times an anniversary or other special occasion was immortalized in verse by a friend. You will find an excerpt from such, written in 1888 by Jane C. Smith.
• Tenney Call will be remembered for his philosophic writings for the “Randolph Herald.” The Herwigs of Randolph Center kindly gave permission for reprinting two from their book “Rustic Rhymes.”
• “Brookfield Hill Roads” introduces the Roads section of this book. The author is the late Bessie Wheatley (Mrs. Arthur), who lived in East Brookfield many years.

• Apologies are extended to the many amateur poets who must have entertained Brookfieldites during the years, and who have not been represented here, but we sincerely hope the reader will enjoy this collection.

THE GRAPEVINE TELEPHONE

By Harold Wheatley

One day I thought I’d hire a horse And take my girl to ride; A horse and buggy with some fringe And tassles on the side.

I heard Irve Abbott had a horse, (He lived two miles away) And he might rent the rig to me If not in use that day.

And so I cranked the telephone, (It was a party wire, Where all the neighbors listen to Whatever may transpire.)

I got Irve after some delay And asked if he could spare His buggy for the afternoon And his old dappled mare.

He 'lowed he could; so I inquired
The price I’d have to pay,
And waited anxiously to hear
What Irve would have to say.

Remember, I was just a lad Without much cash to spare, And dollars in my pocketbook Were precious things and rare.

I held the line while Irving said, Deliberate and slow, “A dollar and a half to you,” A price I knew was low.

Just then another voice spoke up, “He’s askin’ more’n he ought’er; You c’n have my horse and buggy, Hal, For a dollar and a quarter.”
TWO SIDED MAXIMS

A man is known by the company he keeps.
Appearances are deceitful.

Honesty is the best policy.
The truth is not to be spoken at all times.

Too many cooks spoil the broth.
In a multitude of counsellors there is wisdom,
or two heads are better than one.

Out of sight, out of mind.
Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.
Penny wise and pound foolish.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
Nothing ventured, nothing have.

A rolling stone gathers no moss.
A setting hen never grows fat.

...from copybook of Alice M. Kingsbury (Keyes) about 1900.

Copybooks were used by school children as a means of improving their writing skills. They were filled, cover to cover, with poems, stories, verses suitable for autograph albums, and the like.

BROOKFIELD
By Gertrude Bedell, 1943

The snow lies thickly on the lawn,
The maple's stark and bare,
Across the whiteness lies the track
Of a lone, showshoe hare.

The little house sleeps silently,
No curl of smoke betrays
A fire like a living heart
Warming the frosty days.

But when spring comes with thawing breath,
The house will wake up, too
Will yawn, and stretch its timbers old,
To greet a season new.

Once more along the flower bed,
The daffodils will bloom,
Forget-me-nots and violas
Will spread their faint perfume.

The Brookfield clan will gather then,
The Philbricks, Wheatleys, Jones
Will shake the sand of Florida
From their collective bones.

They'll breathe again the mountain air,
And view again with thrills
Brookfield, the very dearest town,
In all the Vermont hills.

VENGEANCE
By Walter Wheatley

Dark and dreary was the night,
A storm was drawing nigh,
In vivid streaks the lightning flashed,
Athwart the leaden sky.

But see, from out the lonely woods
There stands a vengeful man,
A bloodstained club is firmly grasped
Within his strong right hand.

Like a spectre from the unknown world
He glides upon his foe,
A murderous look gleams in his eye
As he readies for the blow.

The club is raised—and then, alas,
It falls with a sickening thud,
And there upon the dark, cold ground
Lies murdered...a potato bug.
"...And today we have gathered, from far and from near,  
To recount this all over, and tender here  
Our sincere regards, Mr. Frink, to you,  
And the wife by your side, who has proved so true  
Through fifty long years of sunshine and shade  
Since that night when her hand into yours she laid,  
And promised to take you for weal or for woe  
And to share in whatever Fate should bestow.

If from the earth you both are called away  
Before you reach your diamond-wedding day,  
Oh! may you then, in that celestial land,  
Stand side by side, as now, and hand in hand,  
And celebrate again your nuptial vow,  
With far more perfect joy than you do now."

THE SOPHISTICATE
By Hal Wheatley

Young Wheeler left the farm and went  
Down country to the city;  
He threw away his overalls,  
Which was a monstrous pity.

He wore stiff collars on his shirts,  
Bought patent leather shoes,  
Affected spats and brilliant ties  
Of many startling hues.

Vacation came and he went home;  
He wanted folks to see  
How he had changed in one short year,  
How smart he'd got to be.

He stopped at Randolph, hired a team  
And then drove home in style;  
He showed off to his family  
And posed for them awhile.

But soon he tired of such small fry,  
He wanted bigger game,  
He harnessed up his livery rig  
And into town he came.

He whipped his horse into a run  
As he approached the store,  
To show his expert horsemanship  
And so impress them more.

'Twas Saturday, and well he knew  
That when the chores were done,  
The farmers came to get their mail  
Or sit around for fun.

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THE DESERTED HOUSE
By Harold Wheatley

One day we went out for a ride,
My cousin Ed and I,
Our goal was Chelsea o'er the hills,
Beyond the woods and purling rills.
Where spreading meadows lie.

We fell to talking of past years,
Of folks long dead and gone,
We noticed here a crumbling wall,
And there a roof perhaps to fall
Before another dawn.

But nature fast was covering up
These scars of yesterday,
And lilacs bloom at rotting sill
Where formerly the voices shill
Of children rang at play.

Such somber thoughts could not endure,
For all the world was gay;
The meadow lark broke out in song;
The brook ran merrily along
And washed our gloom away.

Our thoughts then took another turn,
For we loved things antique;
By great good luck perhaps we'd find
Some relics had been left behind
"Let's stop and take a peek!"

A CUP OF COFFEE
By Hal Wheatley

When old Doc. Davis passed away
Doc. Thompson came to town.
He did first rate in every case
And soon he gained renown.

He got acquainted rapidly
And met a lot of folks;
He made our troubles his concern
And laughed at all our jokes.

He heard a lot of gossip too
Of this one and of that;
He stored up information in
The head beneath his hat.

He heard about old Billy Phelps
Who lives up on the hill
And drinks a lot of coffee, but
Is almost never ill.

He made a mental note to call
On Billy Phelps some day,
And so he stopped one afternoon
When he was up that way.
AUNT DEBBY
By Harold Wheatley

Aunt Debby Haywood left our town
To live with friends near by;
For Debby now was getting old
Although she was quite spry.

Ten happy years she lived and then
Death took Aunt Deb away;
They buried her beneath the sod
One pleasant summer day.

Years passed and friends in her home town
Decided it was best
To have Aunt Debby disinterred
And brought back home to rest.

And so they got the sexton there
To dig up the old lady
And bring her home and bury her
Beside her sister Sadie.

The job was done, and when that night,
The sexton got his mail,
He found a dozen waiting there
To hear him tell his tale.

"Well Eb" says one "You done the job?
You got her up all right?"
"Ye-us" said he, pulled out his plug
And took a generous bite.

"You find the coffin in bad shape?"
Another wished to know,
"Ye-us" says Eb and chews his cud
Deliberate and slow.

"Get a peek at the old lady?"
A third one ventured then,
"Ye-us" says Eb, and took good aim
And splashed a passing hen.

"How did she look?" a fourth one asked,
Whose chin was brown and streak'ed,
Eb got loquacious then and said
"Well, pretty gawdamned peak'ed."

JASPER HODGES
(Elijah Hawes)
(not known if this is the author)

To prove that Mr. Wheatley's not
The only Brookfield poet
I herewith in his book indite
That he may read and know it.

This story comes from Emory Smith,
Not of Brookfield but near it
Who painted and repaired my house,
With all the old time spirit.

Nine years ago this August, we
Were in the front yard working
That day was bright, the sun shone fair
And not a care was lurking.

As Emory worked, he talked as well
Of folks of bygone ages,
Of things they said, of things they did
And crackerbarrel sages.

He mentioned Jasper Hodges, then
A carpenter, grayheaded
Whose chief concern in future life
Was how he would be bedded.

The gravestone did concern him not
Of granite or of marble
He felt he'd not ascend to heaven
And with the angels warble.

No, what concerned old Jasper was
The quickest way of racin'
Through Hades, which he felt would be
His final destination.

He thought and thought, and finally
He got the right solution
It calmed him down, it soothed his brain
In every convolution.

The idea came to him one day
As he woke up from nappin'
He'd build his coffin of-hemlock
And go through Hell a'snappin'!
NO PLACE LIKE HOME
By Harold Wheatley

I love Vermont, and feel at home
When I go there each year;
I drive my car up through the states
And thrill as I draw near.

The hills take on a different shape,
The woods a different look,
The birds sing sweeter in the trees
Above the babbling brook.

The cows look happy as they feed
In pastures on the hills,
Or as they lie beneath the shade
Of trees beside the rills.

The wood roads join the highway
Inviting me to roam
Along their winding hilly course
To some Vermonter’s home.

It may be just around the bend
I’d find his cozy farm;
Or maybe just a cellar hole,
That too for me has charm.

So as I roll along the road
Contentment fills my mind,
For I am in Vermont again,
All cares are left behind.

AUNT LIZZIE’S COFFIN
(Lizzie Harrington)
(not known if this is the author)

Aunt Lizzie Brown lived on the Branch,
Alone in her small cot,
Her spouse and children, long since dead,
Lay in the churchyard plot.

As she grew older, much she thought
About her resting place,
What kind of coffin she would have,
And then, what kind of case.

Aunt Lizzie liked things settled, so
One day by bus she went
To town to pick a coffin out
And call the time well spent.

She looked at this one and at that,
The clerk was very kind,
She finally decided on
An oak, white satin lined.

“There’s one thing more, my good young man,”
Said Lizzie Brown to him,
“I want to be quite sure that I
Will be at ease within.

I’d like to see if it will fit,
When I inside it lie,
For I will be a long time there,
When my turn comes to die.”

The clerk was willing, so he took
Aunt Lizzie’s small, slight form,
And lifted it and put it in
The coffin, soft and warm.

Aunt Lizzie stretched luxuriously,
In length and width ’twas fine,
She’d never had a couch as soft,
She said, “This coffin’s mine!”

“I just send it to this address now,
And here’s the cash to pay,
I’ll use it for a bed until
The final Judgment Day!”

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THE SMILE OF GOD
By Ray Perry

One day as I sat at my table
My breakfast there to eat,
There was a little sunbeam
My eye just chanced to meet.

I looked again— it vanished
As quickly as it came;
And I began to ponder
A reason for the same.

And then in quick conclusion
I gave my head a nod
For I knew I had the answer:
It was the smile of God.

WOOD FIRE
By Tenney Call

Something there is in a woodfire
That seems to raise my spirits higher,
My flagging energy renew;
It sort of thaws me out all through.

I know there’s heat an easier way,
No wood to lug in every day,
No ashes to move anymore,
(I usually spill some on the floor.)

I wonder not folks are enthused
With heat that’s even and diffused,
But I’ll stick to the old time stunt—
A chilly back and roasted front.

RETIREMENT (?)
By Tenney Call

No doubt you’ll think I’m quite absurd
And lacking some requirement,
But I detest a certain word,
And that word is “retirement.”

I know retirement is in style
And long has been the fashion,
But this old mutt it don’t beguile,
For it I have no passion.

I can’t get up the old-time steam,
But long ago I reckoned
That when with first I could not team,
I’d jog along in second.

And as I look o’er life’s highway
Where their feet have once trod
I knew that my dear parents
Had seen the smile of God.

And now that their lives are over
And they lie beneath the sod,
I know they went to Jesus
And He gave them the smile of God.

Of course with wood, as like as not,
It’s first too chilly, then too hot,
But still I like this olden mode—
I don’t expect it will explode.

I miss the chimneys that unfurl
Their woodsmoke with its upward curl,
Though warm within without a doubt,
They sure look cold and dead without.

With some things modern I don’t mix,
It’s hard to teach old dogs new tricks,
So I’ll indulge my heart’s desire
And toast my shins by a woodfire.

Sometimes I have to shift to low;
I don’t like the transition,
But though my spirit still says ‘go’,
There’s slips in my transmission.

I hope I never have to drift;
The joy of life is giving,
When I can’t give a little lift
I won’t be really living.