

village view

by Andrea Leonard

August 26, 1976 VILLAGE ADVERTISER

Although fifty years isn't long in contrast to written history or geologic time, and although millions of Americans easily remember happenings of the 1920's, there've been remarkable changes in our immediate surroundings in these most recent fifty years — changes so gradual those with the best of memories may hardly realize what's taken place.

To make a fair comparison between then and now, it's necessary to refer to written material describing the Cape as it was in 1925 or thereabouts. Only with such resources can we assess progress and measure how far the Cape has come from the provincial backwater it once was.

Page after page of glowing description of the Cape's beauty and charm during the 1920's bring smiles — and a few tears — the smiles for the ingenuous viewpoint of an earlier penman and the tears for nostalgia.

"Present-day Cape Cod" he wrote "is as glorious in its way as the Cape Cod of the days of stirring adventure!" And of course, there had been days of stirring adventure: it was certainly not dull for the colonists who found themselves here in the 1600's.

These were tradespeople, shopkeepers and small merchants. What they didn't know about "roughing it" on the frontier would be just what you and I wouldn't know. Everything. Stirring, indeed!

The early days of the Revolution had been stirring, too. The decisions made at Boston, Philadelphia and Williamsburg, the inflammatory speeches of Barnstable's James Otis, the moderation preached by cooler heads, loyal to the Crown — all these things stirred men's souls.

But now, in 1925, it seemed little of excitement was occurring. The Civil War was over and settled; most of the fiery feeling it had generated between northern and southern states had smoldered down to rapidly cooling ashes.

The War to End All Wars had been fought and won "with God's help, by the right side." There wasn't a lot going on in 1925 that could be called stirring adventure.

Yes, the women caused some commotion when they shortened their skirts to above the knees and cropped their hair to their earlobes; and young men rated raised eyebrows with their wide-cuffed trousers, striped blazers, and straw hats.

Despite flappers, the Charleston, the Black Bottom and the Turkey Trot — despite all the ills and pros and cons of prohibition, it just wasn't a terribly exciting moment in time.

Most stimulating, perhaps, were the changes being wrought by the automobile, then coming into common use. Most people either owned a car or were planning to acquire one as soon as possible.

Especially on Cape Cod, then as now, a car was recognized as more of a necessity than a convenience; with no public transportation the automobile brought to Cape villages, for the first time in history, undreamed of mobility.

The Cape had then (and it's presumed it still does) a total of 261,760 acres of land. In 1920 there were 631 farms with a total of 47,679 acres under cultivation. Two of these farms exceeded 1,000 acres each in size.

The total assessed value of farm property in Barnstable County, fifty years ago, was \$5,545,538. That's over five and one-half million in farm land.

In addition to farming, nearly 3,000 persons were engaged in sea and shore fisheries. Barnstable County also boasted 39 manufacturing establishments employing 428 wage-earners who produced products valued at \$1,599,393 during 1925.

The largest of the manufacturing industries was the Keith Car and Manufacturing Company in Sagamore where railroad cars were built alongside the Cape Cod Canal.

Other industries were connected with fishing, although not directly involved with the catching. In Provincetown as recently as 1925 there were seven large fish-freezing plants and several fish-canning and curing firms. There were still three whaling vessels out of that port.

Sandwich, in 1927, had two fish-freezers and a pulp mill, and was described by the veteran actor, Joseph Jefferson, as "The handsomest town out of England;" and time hasn't hurt it a bit.

Packing fish for market employed more than 300 men of Wellfleet, while 1,500 were employed aboard the fleet of more than 100 vessels in the fishing trade of that town.

Eastham's entire population of 500 residents,