



# Johnson Historical Society Newsletter

September 2024

## A Message From the Board President

As summer fades we look back and remember our friends who joined us for hot dogs, cake and pie. Thank you all for your support.

Fall brings us our regular schedule for the Holcomb House. We are open on the second Friday, the fourth Sunday and always by appointment. Please come visit and check out our varied collection of local memorabilia. We look forward to seeing you.

Dick Simays

## Johnson Historical Society Raffle

There are 5 prizes and the tickets are \$5 each or 6 for \$25. Drawing will be held on November 10 at the Holcomb House. Tickets are available from any board member. Prize #1--Georgia Balch yarn art of Camel's Hump, Prize #2--Watercolor, Four Seasons and 12 note cards painted by Laurie West McLean, Prize #3--Fred Swan signed Print, Cocoa Time, Prize #4--Sap bucket with maple products from Butternut Farms, Prize #5--Wool Blanket from the Johnson Woolen Mill

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY KNOWN AS THE STILES, HOPKINS, NICHOLS FARM (NOW LARAWAY SCHOOL)

Harry and Ada Ballard Stiles acquired the property located at what is now known as 275 Vt. Rt 15W from the Oakes family in 1895. It is believed that the house was built in 1828. As seen in the picture there was the house, barn and two other buildings. Harry and Ada had 8 children, 5 boys and 3 girls, George-1896, Albert-1897, Vernon-1899, Frank-1901, Arthur-1903, Ruth-1906, Clara-1908, and Pauline-1911. Unfortunately, George died when he was 13 years old. Farm life was busy and it was hard work.



Stiles Homestead

Haying was very important in the farming world. The hay would be cut and horses would pull the hayracks to the barn. Pitchforks were used to load the hay onto the hayracks. The man on the top of the load would balance out the weight and aid in the unloading process.

Another method of haying was using a buck rake. Ken actually built the buck rake that was used at the farm. The load of loose hay on the buck rake was brought into the front part of the new barn. (The first part of the inside of the barn was open all the way to the rafters and to the hayloft.) The hay would be lifted up into the hayloft using a large tong and a pulley system that ran on a track high above the length of the hay loft. Each load is guided up and back into the loft by a heavy rope that exited through an opening in the back wall of the hayloft. The rope was attached and pulled by the doodlebug or tractor stationed outside and below that opening. Good communication between the farm workers located at the front of the barn, in the hayloft and the tractor driver was necessary to accomplish this feat.

The water for the farm came from two springs on the north side of the road. The water was gravity fed and was the only thing that kept the milk cold.



*Haying at the Stiles Ranch 1934*



*Harry Stiles with loaded buck rake*

Harry owned 81 acres of wood lots on the other side of the Lamoille River. The trees would be cut down and the logs dragged across the ice on the river. These logs would be sawed and split for firewood and fence posts would be made. In 1994 the wood lots were sold to Edward Buttolph Trust.



*Working on the wood. Ken with log at saw and Harry in front of fence posts*

The Stiles children helped out on the farm when needed. Hired help would be available and also neighbors helping neighbors.

In 1915 the original ell and back woodshed were demolished. Renovations began adding a new ell part making a 2 story structure, which included a kitchen, dining room, 2 bedrooms upstairs, a woodshed and space for one car. The back second story could be reached by going

through a door near the kitchen and the front second story could be reached through a door near the living room. However, once upstairs you could not get from the front to the back of the house.





*Working on wood piles 1935. Harry Stiles, Art Stiles, Harry Newton, Ken Hopkins*

The front was sleeping quarters for family and the back was sleeping quarters for any hired help.

At the time of the 1927 flood, the cows were removed from the barn and sent across the road to higher ground for safe keeping. The rains continued to pour down and the large field behind the farm was completely flooded. The barn and other out buildings were under water. In the house, the water was nearly to the ceiling on the second floor.

Luckily no buildings were lost and the family was safe.

The old Route 15 used to go down by the barns. In 1939 the road was moved north and the underpass was put in. The underpass made it very convenient for the cows to go from the south to the north side of the road and into the pasture.

In 1940 the building of a new dairy barn began. Family and friends worked hard on



*Stiles Ranch 1925--New 2 story addition*



*Stiles farm when the road went down by the barns*



*The new road and Marian walking down the driveway*

the construction, while keeping up with the daily farm chores. The new barn was completed in 1941. A wooden silo was also built at the same time. The old cow barn and horse barn were dismantled.

In 1955 the property was deeded to Ken and Clara Stiles Hopkins. Farm work continued for Ken. He had about 20 Jersey cows to tend and the regular farm chores such as cutting the wood, planting and harvesting, and haying. Ken hayed in the big field by the river and the fields across Rt 15. At this time the hay was baled, loaded onto wagons and brought to the barn. The Hopkins shared a baler with their neighbor, Bill Holmes. The grandsons as well as other family and friends would help out with the haying when needed.





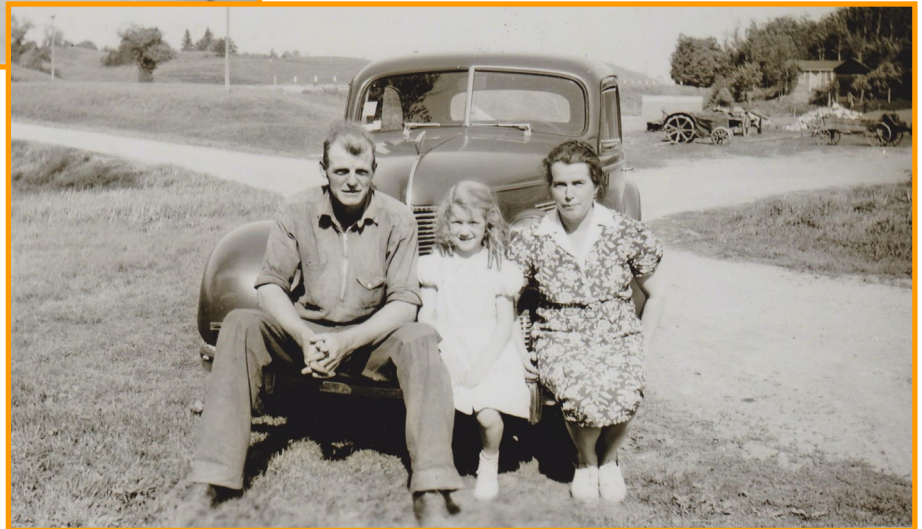
*Start of new barn*



*Putting up roof trusses on new barn 1940*



*New barn with silo*



*Ken, Clara and Marian, May 1944*

Ken grew potatoes across Rt. 15 on the north side. The potatoes were planted on the 2nd level of the field known then as "Telephone Hill". It is believed that part of the field got its name in 1943 when the first real telephone was installed in the farmhouse. This is the same year that Ken became Johnson Fire Warden.

Clara was busy with the housework, sewing and quilting, growing a vegetable garden and preserving it. She was a wonderful cook and baker using the old kitchen stove which is now on display at the Holcomb House.

Although the families did not sugar there were four maple trees that were called the 4 Brothers. Those trees were tapped and a small pan was set up in the open where Marian and Phil Cook (her cousin) boiled the sap. So much fun for those youngsters.

In 1960 dairy farming was discontinued and the cows were sold.

The farmers who owned their own farms within a mile or two radius and may have helped at the Stiles--Hopkins farm included; Hess, Newton, Holmes, Lehouillier, Stanton, French, Morin, Audibert and Kneeland.



*Marian Hopkins and Phil Cook sugaring*

In 1974 Sidney and Marian Hopkins Nichols were deeded 50% of the property. The remaining 50% was purchased in 1995. Sidney installed a storage tank for the water and eventually drilled a well.

The Nichols renovated the house in 1998. They dismantled the shop, hen house, old barn and woodshed. A garage, back entry, pantry and porch were added on. The old milk house remains on the property.

Another interesting note: four couples, Harry and Ada Ballard Stiles, Ken and Clara



*Nichols Farm 2008*



Stiles Hopkins, Vern and Edith Nichols Stiles (Edith was sister to Sidney's father) and Sidney and Marian Hopkins Nichols have all celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a party at the farm.

In 2007 approximately 40 acres of land on the north side of Rt. 15 W was sold to Ben and Stacey Waterman.

The remaining property was sold to Laraway School on March 20, 2009.

The end of a 112 year, 3 generation legacy!!

## **EXCERPTS FROM A STORY "LIFE ON THE FARM" 1940-1955 WRITTEN BY MARIAN HOPKINS NICHOLS IN 2010-2011**

*Growing up on a dairy farm in Johnson was not as boring and primitive as one might suspect. While I had no siblings there were often cousins and neighbors and pets to keep me company.*

*My mother, Clara or Jane as she was known to family members, none of whom really know why and her 7 siblings were all born at home, in the "further room" you know. Was there a medical person in attendance? I never asked. I was born at the old Copley Hospital in Morrisville.*

*I do recall many pleasant activities at the farm, many of which involved food and eating. It makes me sad to know some people never experience the fragrance of fresh baked bread and so many varieties of home baked pies on the old wood stove. About 1950 my mother did buy a second hand small electric range to use mostly in the summer as the wood fire made the kitchen a bit too warm!*

*There was always gardening to do in season. Planting the seeds was fun but weeding didn't excite me. I did like to dig potatoes with my dad. He made it like a contest to see who could find the most good potatoes in one hill. He did raise the best potatoes I ever ate, possibly Green Mountain---What Else?? Barn chores were always preferable to housework as I liked the animals and it seemed more like fun than actual work.*

*Threshing season meant neighbors gathered to reap one farmers crop, then all went on to the next farm and so forth., corn had to be cut, chopped and blown into the silo. That stuff had an odor all its own, but it did feel cool on my bare feet as it was my responsibility to stomp on the gooey stuff in the silo.*



*Threshing at the Stiles farm*

*I enjoyed riding on the huge work horses which were replaced by a tractor in 1949. I also enjoyed helping take the cattle to and from the pasture in the summer through the under pass. Sick animals were always scary, for a farmers livelihood depended on healthy cattle. Dr. Edgar Scott was the vet then and could be summoned at any hour to cure or recommend other measures.*

*Birthdays and holidays were always celebrated with homemade ice cream, homemade cakes and home grown foods. Fall and winter dinners would consist of some wild game as my family were avid hunters.*

*Winter sports were fun back then with skating, sliding, tobogganing and skiing on the hills and in the fields. There was always hot chocolate and homemade cookies after a time outdoors.*



*Harry and Ken filling silo at the Stiles farm*

*We had no central heat, but kept 4 wood stoves burning constantly. The upstairs bedrooms were a bit cold, but homemade quilts were always abundant. There were some real snow storms and we could build tunnels through the massive snow drifts and play in them for hours.*

*Housework and farm chores kept me busy. From the farm house windows one could view wildlife and visitors always enjoyed the expanse of the fields. Once upon a time there was a train that went by across the river, on the railroad named the St. J & L C. (St. Johnsbury & Lamoille County).*

*When there was an opportunity I could work for some neighbors, Glen and Madge Thompson picking berries, husking popcorn or other chores and also for Ivan and Marion Stanton. Money was always scarce so I was glad for an opportunity to make some of my own. With my savings over time I purchased a second hand bicycle from my neighbor, Mary Newton, and certainly made use of that.*

*I joined 4H and did some sewing which I still enjoy. There was gardening, cooking and they tried to teach me some tractor maintenance, but I didn't win any prizes in that department. Since there was always a need for someone to drive the farm equipment, I may have been about 12 when I learned to drive the tractor and the old farm truck. Safety was always stressed.*

*Growing up on the farm made me frugal and hopefully gave me a respect for our environment, gratefulness for family and friends and a willingness to help others. I believe these were values I was taught as a young person and I hope I instilled them in my three children, none of whom pursued farming as a career.*

## **Board of Trustees**

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## **Holcomb House Open Hours**

- Second Friday from 9am to noon
  - Fourth Sunday from 1-3pm
- Open by appointment, call any board member.

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