

THE WEBBS IN SHELBURNE

Even after all these years it's hard to see the Webbs in perspective. Probably my family felt more resentment than others since so many of them were dispossessed. (My father was born in the house at the top of Breeding Barn Hill and several other Tracy families lived on the estate.) It was a combination of disgust with their own gullibility and short-sightedness, and fury that one wealthy couple could deprive a whole town of miles of its roads and all of its lake shore. The fact that they had been paid a generous price only intensified the frustration. (My grandfather Julius Tracy was able to buy the farm and build the house at the head of Bostwick Road.) Many of the original families moved away from town.

The Webbs imposed a manor house mentality on a small town of about 800 people - many of them original settlers - who were not used to being serfs or condescended to. The Webbs were resented, envied, feared, ridiculed and toadied to, but they could not be ignored. The third generation was contemporaneous with mine but I never knew them. (My father once remarked that Derrick was the first Webb to come down off the throne.)

In their Anglophilia they imported servants from Britain. The English butler was a very powerful person in town. They built English-style cottages (unsuited to our climate) for their help, tearing down almost all the old farmhouses and the schoolhouse (such as Electra Webb would later collect at her museum). Most of their servants lived on the estate or in the village behind the train station which they also rebuilt to accommodate their private car. These imported people were in a very peculiar situation. It took a generation for them to be accepted by the town.

The actual physical impact of the Webbs was at its peak in the fall during the fox-hunting season. I remember the master of the hounds in a red coat on horseback, shepherding a pack of baying hounds down the main street. It seemed incongruous and frivolous to us. The hunters often trampled fields and took down fences. Farmers were paid for the damage and given a party at the end of the season.

The Webbs also rebuilt Trinity Church and supported it. There were few native Vermonters willing to attend. It was considered Webb property and the rector one of their servants. Agnes Dwyer, a rector's daughter, was a good friend of mine and I occasionally attended a Sunday evening service with her, to the dismay of my parents. Not only was Trinity "high" church but it also belonged to the Webbs. They held family weddings and funerals there and attended services when they were in town. Across the street we children peeked through the curtains to marvel at the elegance.

The first town cemetery was on Shelburne Farms and must have presented some problems to the Webbs, since they couldn't (or didn't) move it. A no-doubt-apocryphal story has it that my grandfather, John V.S. Maeck, had a relative buried there and couldn't endure the thought. So he took his hired man and a shovel and moved the body to the village cemetery. A dozen or so early Tracys, as well as related families like the Comstocks, are there and we always felt free, though uncomfortable, in visiting it, as I do to this day. No Shelburne people were buried there after 1880. This little cemetery makes some interesting mute statements about the Webb/Village relationship. The first generation ignored it; some members of the second and third are buried there, but protected from their neighbors by a sturdy yew hedge.

The old town hall burned. Electra Webb replaced it with her concept of a proper colonial building. I do not believe she consulted with anyone in town about its architecture. As I remember, people were a bit sullen and tight-lipped about it, while outwardly grateful. She gave a very elegant party to celebrate its opening, at which most townspeople were quite uncomfortable, including me. The presence of the Webbs was very hard on our self-esteem.

I had some comfort of a sort when I was nineteen and in college. Harry Webb must have been twelve or thirteen and was having big trouble with Latin I. Mrs. Webb consulted my father about a tutor and, armed with my five years of Latin, I spent some of my Christmas vacation trying to help him. It was gratifying to feel superior in something!

There were mixed feelings about the Shelburne Museum. My mother was disgusted. With all that land, why didn't Mrs. Webb use some of it and not invade the town again? Because she didn't want the hoi polloi on Southern Acres was the verdict. It was many years before Mother was convinced that the museum was more than the overflow of a private hobby and I could persuade her to donate some memorabilia.

Now in my seventy-eighth year, do I think that the coming of the Webbs was a good for the town? No. For the land? Perhaps.