

Earl H. Newcomb

2/8/1918 - 6/30/2004

Museum of Our Industrial Heritage

Newell Snow Factory

2 Mead Street, Greenfield, MA 01301

“Bunkum Camp” named by its founder, remains today on the shores of the Connecticut River in Montague MA. Built with hand tools in 1936 by a very talented, industrious, and determined man, it represents the vision and desire of one special person to immerse himself in the sanctity of nature. He left the cherished camp to his family, and they treasure this legacy today.

This is the story of Earl H. Newcomb, a descendant of one of the earliest settlers in New England---- Captain Andrew Newcomb (1618-1686) of Devonshire, England. Captain Newcomb sailed to Virginia and later lived on Martha’s Vineyard and in Boston MA where his life ended at the age of 68.

Earl Howard Newcomb was born 300 years later, on February 8, 1918, in Franklin County Public Hospital, Greenfield MA. He was the son to Alice Elizabeth (Moreau) of Shattucksville MA and Harrison “Harry” Stephen Newcomb of West Deerfield MA. Earl was the eldest of three children, followed 11 months later by his sister Dorothy Woodrow and soon after another sister, Eleanor Ruth.

His mother, Alice, worked as a House Mother at Deerfield Academy in Old Deerfield MA, and took in sewing while raising three children. His father held various jobs, including as a barber, and later a chauffeur for four Greenfield physicians. The family lived in West Deerfield, where Earl’s relatives farmed crops and ran a dairy business. Unfortunately, the marriage between Alice and Harry ended around 1927 when Earl was just nine. Without child support, Alice raised her three children alone, honing her sewing skills into tailoring. She never remarried.

Earl, despite his young age, took his role as “man of the house” seriously. Strong in both body and mind, he looked after his mother and sisters. He was often found building----small boats, wooden airplanes, soap box racers----anything his inventive spirit could conceive. His cleverness and curiosity served him well. He graduated from Greenfield High School where he earned the nickname “Windy” for his athletic abilities in track and field. He sprinted like the wind. He also became certified as a Volunteer Fire Fighter. Drafting and carpentry came easily to him, as did traversing the valleys’ mountainous woodlands, hunting and fishing. He developed a deep appreciation for the natural world, often hunting as a teenager to help support his family. He was never wasteful, honoring his catch by utilizing all of it.

At age 16, Earl hand built his first “camp” on a relatives property in West Deerfield MA----a rudimentary shack to retreat to. His dream, however, was to build a real camp in the woods, near flowing water. In 1936, at the age of 18, he found the perfect spot. He leased land along the Connecticut River from Western Mass Electric Co. and began drawing plans for his new camp. A gifted draftsman, Earl’s meticulous ingenuity and craftsmanship allowed him to build his get-away and keep it off the grid.

Can you imagine an 18 year old today, without a car, and no power tools, building a camp with hammer, nails and hand saw? Earl was self taught and learned how to build many things----masonry to make a functional concrete dam, a dirt road with only a shovel, a windmill to run a generator engine and make electricity with car batteries, a water tower holding tank to gravity feed water into the camp from a brook, field stone fireplaces, and brick chimneys. Wharf's, floating docks, and row boats, to name a few, all without power tools!

Bicycling from Greenfield to Turners Falls was Earl's only mode of transportation. Determined, he would tie lumber onto his bike and ride the long miles from one town to the other. His journey ended in the woods on a two mile dirt road he constructed by shovel to access his site. Occasionally, a friend with a truck would assist in transporting materials.

A lover of music, talented dancer, roller skater and ice skater he enjoyed having fun. Friendly, humorous and trust worthy he formed many lasting friendships. He remained close with his sisters, and they shared these friendships. On any given Sunday afternoon "the gang" of twelve or so could be seen on bicycle outings or enjoying the camp. "Ma Newcomb", as his friends fondly called his mother, was always at the heart of the fun at Bunkum Camp. There they featured cook outs over open fires, horseshoe games, boating, swimming and other out door activities.

Earl was industrious and committed to his family. Seeking a stable future, he learned a local industry in Greenfield, the Millers Falls Company on Wells Street, offered an apprenticeship to become a machinist. Earl applied and submitted the requested letters of character reference from several prominent figures. One of his endorsers was Mr. Timothy Toomey, Foreman, Fluting Dept., Greenfield Tap & Die Corporation (GTD). He was also sponsored by Millers Falls Co. executives, Earl Holtby and Donald Swain. Earl completed his four year apprenticeship with Millers Falls Co. on February 26, 1939 just two weeks after his 21st birthday. He was now on his way to becoming an avid and skilled machinist. Though being left-handed sometimes posed challenges, his great physical strength qualified him to work on the heaviest machines.

In 1944, at the age of 26, Earl secured a bank loan of \$3,500 with a 15 year mortgage and bought a home in Greenfield for his mother, sisters and himself. He promised to care for them until his sisters married. True to his word, the three siblings married, ladies first, from 1944 to 1946. Little did anyone know that 23 West Street would become Earl's home for the next 60 years where he would build a family of his own, with two marriages, two children, and five grandchildren, until his death in 2004.

As World War II unfolded and escalated with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941, Earl was denied military service due to a genetic knee issue. He continued his work at Millers Falls Company, where his skills as a machinist were invaluable to the war effort. Earl's sisters, Dorothy and Eleanor worked at Greenfield Tap and Die Corporation (GTD) on Sanderson Street. They too were indispensable working in the wrapping and shipping department of GTD. All local industry played a large role in supporting the war.

Wedding bells rang and gold rings were placed on Earl's and his brides finger on March 13, 1946. He married the love of his life, Bernadine "Bunny" Goldie Cotton of Greenfield. Bunny also worked at GTD during WWII and was very close friends with Earl's sister Dotty. Sadly after only 7 years of marriage, in 1952 Bunny died from kidney failure at the young age of 30. All of Bunny's six siblings and her parents, Henry and Ruth Cotton, adored Earl. He felt the same, and in 1954 he married Bunny's younger sister Eleanor, "Elkie".

Elkie had enlisted in the U.S. Women's Army Corp. (WAC) in the U.S Army 402nd Military Band the year before Earl and Bunny were married. She was proud to serve her country. She played trumpet and was stationed at the Presidio Army Post in San Francisco, out on the Bay playing the troops home as the fleets returned at the end of WWII in September 1945.

After her honorable discharge, Elkie (known as "Cotton") was hired as a professional musician with the Fortune 500 Company, Geo. A. Hormel & Co. (Hormel Foods, i.e. Spam) established in Austin, Minnesota in 1891. The company's long tradition of supporting the U.S. military and its veterans began when three employees enlisted with the Minnesota National Guard to serve in the Spanish-American War. George A. Hormel promised full benefits and jobs when they returned. George's son, Jay C. Hormel, carried on the tradition. In 1946 the "Hormel Girls", a traveling all-women's drum-and-bugle corps was formed to promote the company's products, giving jobs to women veterans. They evolved into an orchestra and toured the 48 states performing stage and radio shows to continue promotions. Once Elkie decided to work closer to home, in Boston, she became the first female sales representative for Hormel, competing with 15 other candidates, all men.

Elkie and Earl were kindred spirits through their committed service to their country during war time, as well as both deeply loved and missed Bunny. Earl embarked on a love letter writing campaign, and Elkie's desire to settle down and have a family, led to their marriage on July 11, 1954. They continued to live in Earl's house and raised a daughter and son. Earl rarely lost a day of work as a machinist for the soon to be renamed Millers Falls Tool Company. He was a dedicated employee in Department #3 for 48 years where work ethics were strong and the camaraderie palpable. The company hosted an annual Christmas party for all employees and their families at the Garden Theater auditorium on Main Street, Greenfield. It was complete with a visit from Santa Claus and presents for all the children. The theater was always packed elbow to elbow with joyous music and laughter.

The company was sold to Ingersoll Rand in 1962 and continued operations at the Wells Street location until 1978 when the brick factory building in Greenfield was vacated. Production moved to a new plant in South Deerfield MA. In 1983 Earl retired at the age of 65 to spend more time in the woods and on the river at his beloved Bunkum Camp, fishing, boating, hunting, hiking, always making improvements to the property, and sitting by the campfire with family and friends. A humble and content man, Earl died peacefully in Greenfield at the age of 86 on June 30, 2004. Eleanor, his wife of 50 years, died just five weeks later on August 6.

Earl Newcomb's dedication to his crafts remain apparent even today. From his youthful inquisitiveness leading to designs and creations, fun loving and adventurous nature, construction of Bunkum Camp, to the strategically important work at Millers Falls Tool Co. supporting the U.S. military, his exemplary life legacy of lasting and impressive accomplishments are an inspiration. One only need to have witnessed his collection of intricate tools, in the basement of 23 West Street, to truly appreciate Earl's drive and passion.

by
Bonnie Lee "Leena" Newcomb
Earl's daughter ~ December 2024