

# ~ Denmark Historical Society ~

## ~ Newsletter ~

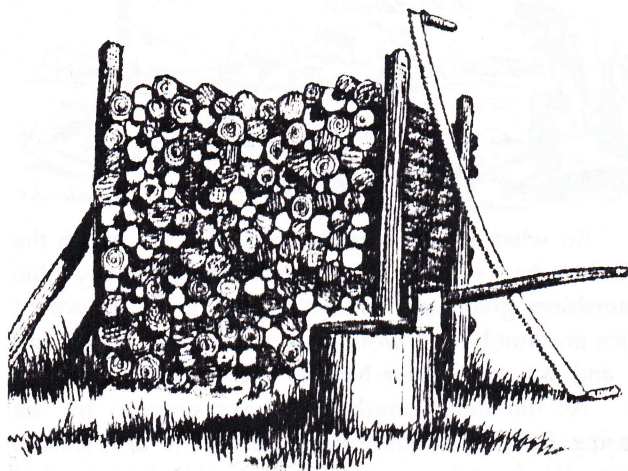
Vol. 3 No. 2

March - April 1996

### I'll Know It When I See It

To say the least, Spring has been somewhat elusive this year. Just when we thought the snow was gone for good and the sun was shining fully down upon us Mother Nature had a change of heart and sent us a reminder of what we had thought was then behind us. Just as in other years we were forced once again to wait it out with the sure knowledge that one day "it" really would be here. What is the one true sign, and is it the same for everyone who watches? Does everyone wait or are there ways of keeping busy until you look up and, as if by magic, the world has been transformed? Who are the watchers and what do they look for.

We may enjoy snowy outdoor sports, or reading by the fireside, out enjoying the winter weather or keeping out of it. Winter is not without its charms, but sooner or later, our thoughts tend to wander to other pursuits and warmer weather. There is a restlessness inside that a good book, the latest movie, or a challenging picture puzzle cannot quell. We wander often to the window, we sniff the air, we look for different birds at the feeder. Living where we do, the seasons and the changes they bring about are part of our very bones and we feel those the same as any dormant plant or woodland animal.



It may seem odd that the onset of spring has traditionally been a time to prepare things for the following winter. March, the month of laying in the wood, has been the time to cut and split next year's firewood. Logs cut in the woods over the winter months were hauled in, some of it made into rails to build or

repair fences. Eric Sloane, in his The Seasons of America Past, wrote, "In the 1700's it was the practice to cut fencing during the winter, but with the 1800's came the knowledge that virgin oak, hickory, and chestnut split into rails in winter that would last only twenty years, while the same trees felled in August (during the second running of sap) lasted fifty." That may have been so, but we seldom see a stand of virgin timber these days, and we seldom have to split rails for fences. However, March was the month that many of our forebears "looked to their fences" as a good fence was often worth more than the land and buildings it surrounded.



There were several kinds of fences built around the early farms. Several common varieties were the old pole fence, the stake and rider, the zigzag rail fence, the posthole fence, and the most common in New England, the stone wall. One important construction detail of the zigzag fence was laying of foundation stones. One stone would hold the rail off the ground, but two foundation stones were set at each junction of the fence so that moisture would not creep up the stone to rot the rail. The rails were set alternately creating a fence that interlocked over the foundation stones. It was better to set the double stones than to have to replace rotted bottom rails.



The end of winter was also the time for working pieces of wood that had been seasoned all winter by the hearth, and the evening hours provided time for carving ax handles and other specialized tools, as well as whittling spiles for maple sugaring time.

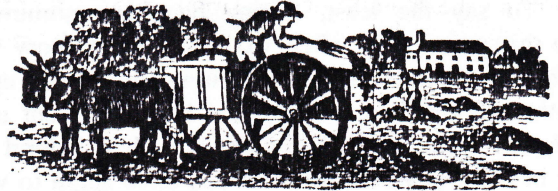
Many early houses had fairly small windows and few rooms. Families were often cramped together in rooms heated by wood-burning stoves and the fresh air of the lengthening days beckoned them outdoors. Houses were not warm by our standards today and it was not uncommon for many people to catch the proverbial "spring cold". Major causes for the increase in colds in this season were great fluctuations in weather patterns and people, as anxious for spring then as we are today, shedding their heavy winter underwear for their lighter weight "longies". Winter "longies" use to be made of heavy woolen flannel, not cotton like the "Duofold" underwear of today. A tombstone in Jonesport, Maine, reads: "Here lies the body of Ephraim Daniels, who chose the dangerous month of March to change his winter flannels." Then, as now, folks continually searched for the cold remedy that would really work. George Washington's cure was to "eat a toasted onion before going to bed." Mustard plasters and hot mustard foot baths were in vogue for many years. Hot lemonade was given to children whereas adults often drank a stronger lemonade concoction to ease their symptoms. I can remember my grandmother telling me to suck the juice from a lemon through a sugar cube to cure a sore throat.



Winter nights with their snow-covered ground are pretty quiet, but once the snow melts and the ponds thaw the evening hours can be quite deafening in contrast. First come the peepers, then the tree toads, then their voices are joined by the first insects to combine in what is known as the "April chorus".

"Manuring", from the Latin word for hand, "manu", was the big spring job. It meant to work the land by hand, to cultivate. Traditionally this has been a

time to add winter's composted materials and animal wastes to the soil with the result that we think of manure only in the most negative of terms, unless one is a farmer or a gardener. These materials have been spread over the fields and gardens throughout time. If laid out before the ground thaws, spring rains will help blend it with the soil as its nutrients leach out to be absorbed, and later tilled in when the ground dries out enough to be worked.



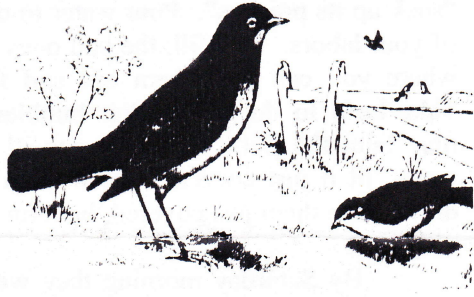
April was time for clearing stumps and the rocks pushed up and loosened by winter's frost, time to get out the "stoneboat" and "twich out the big ones". A stoneboat is a heavily planked flat sled without runners pulled by horses or oxen. They still come in handy for the same purpose today. They were often the first vehicles over the thawing spring roads no longer satisfactory for sleds and not yet ready for the wheels of carts and buggies. As they slid along over the surface, they helped repair the ruts and smooth over the old roads until they were dried out enough to support wheels. It was the custom for men to work on their segment of road as part of working off their taxes and often several men would get together in a crew to make lighter work of long sections in their area.



So what are the signs of spring? We watch the weather as days of wet, heavy snow, followed by blue sky sunshine, give way to days of rain and a return of puddles and mud. We wonder if we'll ever see the end of it, and we wait while Mother Nature makes up her mind. As the days lengthen, we are cheered by the increasing light and look for longer spells of pleasant weather. We have been so use to the cold of winter that now we seem to sense a stronger physical sensation in the change of the breeze, the slight differences in temperature, a slackening of winter's hold upon our souls, the promise of spring's return.

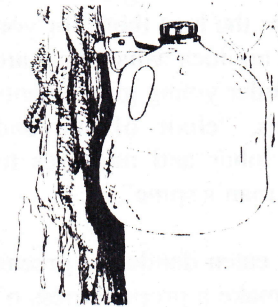
Many of us watch the pond, looking for the blue water to appear from under its gray-white woolly blanket. We watch as the ice takes on a duller appearance, loses its smooth hardness, and take bets on when the ice will be gone and the blue of the spring sky will be reflected in the moving surface of the water once again. And suddenly, that smell on the breeze - what is it? Ah, fresh water, the open pond. Open water and a fresh wind bring to mind the thought of that small sailboat that has spent the winter in the back of the barn. When the "ice is out" we finally let ourselves believe that winter really has lost its grip and spring is under way. In the north country this signifies that we are "turning one of the great corners of time".

This is the time when we find ourselves walking the fields in big rubber boots to see just how far the snow has receded, greeting the new stones in the garden, counting the crows in the old cornfield and the robins in the backyard, and noticing the trills and whistles of birds not here in winter. We seek the higher, drier ground as we stroll the sodden fields with their rock wall margins as we look for the swelling buds in the orchard and the more highly colored twigs in the woods. And there it comes to us, the open music of running water in the old brook, the heady aroma of wet earth and vernal warmth. The woods retain their winter clothes while the open fields reveal through their cover of winter-dead grass the first new tender shoots of green, the promise of more to come. Beneath the residue of snow and mud the fine roots are shaking off the last of their winter's sleep to stretch and reach for the sun. What courage, what endurance! Two high circling hawks are spotted as they, too, survey the changes in the fields. If we are lucky, we might even catch the soft honking overhead of a returning flock of geese. That irregular "v" can stir the heart and touch the soul as few other sights and sounds.



Turning for home, a whiff of wood smoke reminds us that a small fire in the kitchen stove will take the dampness out of us, and that a bowl of hot soup will still be a welcome lunch. The road in the distance is a noonday glisten of mire and ruts, and how about that driveway? Boats on trailers towed by eager fishermen pass by the house, and we wonder when the first visitors

will venture up the muddy hill. It is a surprise to see the UPS truck turn up the old road, and not remarkable when the tow truck turns up the same road about twenty minutes later. Hard to suppress a chuckle or two when the bigger tow truck turns up the same road.



Milk jugs hang on the sugar maples in the side yard collecting the clear sap that will be turned into liquid gold with a smoky flavor not found in the store-bought syrup. The lilac bush has buds on it the size of acorns despite continually being buried by snow falling off the barn roof.

And daffodils are poking up by the front door. In the back hall the boots are all lined up but the dog's footprints clearly show his path across the kitchen floor. Tomato seedlings stand vigil on the window sill keeping watch on the sun. Wonder when the ground will be ready to plant the peas? Time to make lists of things to do and make sure the tractor is ready for another season..

All the outside chores depend upon the weather so sometimes you have to wait until morning to decide just which ones to do, or make the decision to do them despite what the weather has to offer. Returning to the old kitchen is all the more welcoming as we step over the well-worn threshold that has been hollowed by the many footsteps of feet belonging to those who have done the same chores before us, and the latches and door handles have grown accustomed to the touch of many hands. The warmth within, the "house spirit", says, "I will take care of you as you take care of me".

We join those who lived here before us in the kitchen of the old farm, those men who cleared the fields, made them larger, who shaped the timbers of the barn, laid the foundations, tended the fields, planted the gardens, who made the harvest. In the kitchen, too, are the women who made this a home by caring for their men and children, cooking, weaving, washing, putting up the harvest. In the barn all the worn places show where the animals followed their daily routines and their smells and character give the barn its special ambiance. Our animals know these things and feel at home with these animal spirits. As we tend to their needs today we have a sense of what it might have been like in the nineteenth century, and the coming of spring with all its changes creates new patterns within old patterns renewing the

human spirit and reaffirming our roots in the land and our ties with the past.

### Nothing Like A Little Spring Tonic

Love 'em or hate 'em dandelion greens have been known since ancient times as the best thing for you come Spring. City folks have no idea what they are discarding when they rip those tender young green plants out of their lawns. Dandelions, "elixir of sun and chlorophyll", more vital than sulphur and molasses to "put the iron and the youth into a man's spine".

Many people have never eaten dandelion greens so have no idea how to begin to make a proper "mess o' greens". They are not meant to be a mere side dish but the center of the meal, the whole works, and there's nothing like sitting down to eat the first "mess" of the season. Now we are not talking about the bitter adult dandelions with tough stalks of golden flowers, but the early tender youngsters. They are not eaten raw. Nor are they only lightly steamed as other greens. These are cooked through and through in the ancient kettle with a chunk of salt pork in their midst until they are tender as butter and just about melt in your mouth. They are not eaten as vegetables. They are "life", something that will stick with you, they are "iron and soul".

It has been said that a Maine man might eat five plates of greens with a dash of vinegar and call for more. Then he'll go out and run rings around the boys, shingle the side of the barn, clear all the juniper out of the back pasture, mend all the fences and race the horse down the road and probably win. Yes, a good mess o' greens is just the thing to cure whatever ails you. It's the stuff of life.



### Baked Bean Saturday Night

Truly good baked beans begin in the soil. Seed may originate in any other state but it must pass through the flinty soil of New England, and thus be "redeemed and rededicated", the only way to bring out the best in a bean. Let it warm in the earth and grow straight for the sunlight, all leaves and blossoms. Let the plant be pulled between "fog and fog", let them be stacked between "frost and frost", then threshed and stored in a New England pantry or you take the chance of sorely disappointing the diners on Saturday nights.

There is a proper course to follow when making a pot of beans. To begin you must clear the kitchen of all extraneous bodies, "tie out the dog and push out the cat. You don't want anything to upset the beans in the delicate ritual of preparation." Pour your beans into an earthenware jar, no metal must touch the beans or they'd "suck up its poisons". Pour water to cover over the fruit of your labors. Overfill; the bad ones will rise to the top where you can pick them out and throw them away. Take heed to do this as "air bubbles or flinty hearts" may taint the pot. Don't chance it! Then empty the water 'til it just covers. Check them overnight as they drink, keep them just covered, but don't let them drown.

By Saturday morning they will have soaked up all their little skins can hold. And they are ready to parboil. Do not neglect this. Pour the beans back into the bean pot with fresh water just to cover. Cover the pot and set it on the back of the stove. Give it an hour to come to a gentle boil. Just as the skins begin to wrinkle, snatch it off and pour off the water saving it to add back to the beans during cooking. Grease the pot from the bottom up with salt pork adding a thin slice to the bottom of the pot. Replace the beans, add another chunk of salt pork and a medium quartered onion, "one full of fire and bite". Sprinkle with mustard, pepper, salt and a pinch of paprika. Pour in the piping hot water reserved earlier and retaining the essence of bean.

Here is where opinions and recipes differ. Some would say there is a war of sorts between those who prefer sweet and those who prefer non-sweet. Then there are those who prefer molasses and those who prefer brown sugar. Either way you like, at this point carefully stir in the flavorings with a long spoon. Then put on the cover and very carefully so not to jar or shock the pot, slide it into the oven.

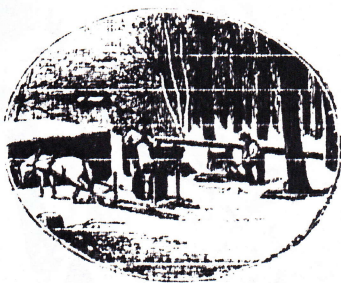
Do not hurry beans! Eight hours will bake them nicely in a slow oven about 250 degrees. The best beans,

of course, are baked by a wood fire, especially those cooked in the bean holes of lumber camps. Once each hour gently lift the lid to replace water cooked into the beans. The last time you do this leave the cover off and bring up the pork to brown and let the surface crust develop. After a full eight hours everyone is allowed to return to the kitchen to partake the log awaited feast of properly prepared baked beans, accompanied, for sure, by a steaming cylinder of flavorful brown bread.

### Four Weeks Is A Long Season

A very sure sign that winter is losing its hold on the earth is when the sap starts to run ushering in the maple sugaring season. It is one of the shortest seasons there is, but one full of promise and enjoyable outdoor work. With refined cane sugar so readily available the making of maple sugar "is already considered a quaint pursuit" but the flavor and quality cannot be matched by the commercial sweeteners. "Two hundred years ago there was four times the amount of maple sugar and syrup produced each year as there is now. Sugaring was hard work, but the American farmer made such a cheerful season of it that the whole family looked forward to sugaring, making it more play than work."

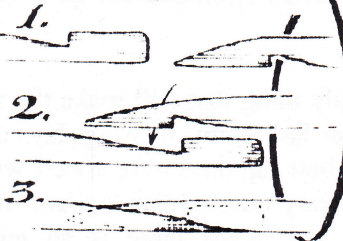
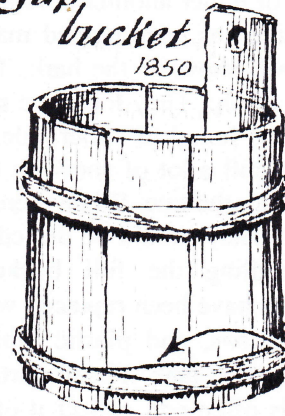
The trick was in having everything ready before the sap began to run. Winter nights were made for whittling spiles by the fire, short lengths of sumac shaped to fit and swell in the tapped hole, the center pith burned out by a rod heated in the fire's coals. Buckets were made entirely of wood, the staves held tightly in place by hoops made from wet wood, lapped and hooked, which held fast when they dried.



## March

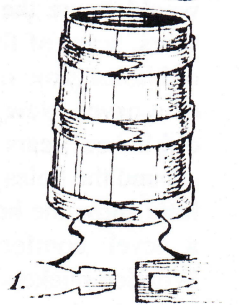
In 1860 maple syrup production ran more than 6,500,000 gallons. It is now about a third of that, a diminishing "luxury" business getting smaller in national scale every year. New York State produces about 33 % and New England about 37%. Vermont is perhaps the most well known producer of maple products, or at least

Maple sugar  
Sap  
bucket  
1850

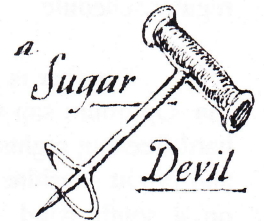


Locked-Lap Hoop

Sugar-Tub



1.  
2.  
Buttonhole Hoop



a  
Sugar  
Devil

the most publicized, but do not discount the Maine maple man. "Syrup made by a good man in a good sugar year is pretty hard to beat."

In the old farm pantries maple sugar was kept in a bucket or box. You have heard of the "sugar loaf". When sugar was needed, a small hammer or sugar auger was used to break a portion from the block and could be used as a lump or ground fine. It was dark, hard stuff and when a hole was made in the surface sometimes a dark thick syrup would fill the depression. This was called "maple molasses" and was sometimes used for curing a plug of tobacco. Country syrup was often black as molasses. Fancy sugar was not readily produced until the advent of evaporators, around the early 1900's.

The first step in the sugaring operation, regardless of the number of trees in one's sugarbush, is tapping the trees. The sap flows best in healthy trees with an abundance of large limbs. It helps, too, if they are relatively easily to get to when you go to collect the sap. With his drill, spouts and a hammer in a bucket the sugarmaker heads out. Because the sun speeds up the thawing process, the sap will run better on the southeast to southwest sides of the trunk. A good spot to drill is over a large root or under a large limb. Using a 7/16<sup>th</sup> bit drill the hole about 1 1/2" into good wood. This may be 2 1/2" deep depending on the thickness of the bark

which can sometimes be quite rough. Drilling at a slight upward angle will take advantage of gravity flow. If the sap is already running you will see it before you set the spout. Never bore a hole over or under another hole as it would injure the tree. If the tree has been tapped many years, scars of the old holes will show on the bark. The old holes grow over but never fill up. They look like sort of a navel. New holes should be bored to either side of old holes. Years when there is still a lot of snow on the ground the holes will be higher up the tree. When there is little snow the holes are lower. They should be drilled at a level comfortable for handling the full buckets. Wooden buckets with tin covers have been replaced with metal buckets, plastic milk cartons, and plastic tubing systems that run to a large collection tank. The important thing is to check the sap levels often and collect it on a regular schedule.

Weather is the only thing that will make the sap run. Optimum sap weather has warm, thawing days and hard freezing nights. The best sap days have a west wind and bright sunshine. It is very unusual that sap will run on a south wind. Cold sap, when there is an icicle hanging to the spout, is tops. The minute the frost goes out of the ground and the buds begin to swell the sap takes on a leathery taste and the season ends. If you see a tan tint in the sap, it is gone.

All the trees are as individual as people. Each year adds different character to the sugaring season. Some trees give lots of sap, others less. Some trees give sweeter sap. It takes about forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. A season that yields sweeter sap will also yield more syrup from that forty gallons. Some days you may have to empty your buckets four or five times and they'll be overflowing. Other days you may only need to empty them twice and they will not be full.

Gathering the sap can be more difficult when there is snow on the ground. Large scale collection used to be done with sleds and oxen. Small backyard producers generally pack down a trail from tree to tree on snowshoes. Once the track is packed down hard you can walk it in boots only. As long as the nights are cold enough this works fine, but when the snow starts to really go, the going gets rough. Walking the track with full buckets of sap becomes an art when your boots suddenly crash through the crust. Better not spill a drop of that precious liquid. Those buckets can get pretty heavy by late afternoon.!

Early sugarmakers and backyard producers have relied on a simple wood fire for cooking down the sap. A

shallow pan that provides a greater evaporating surface is more practical than a deeper container and a rapid boil will get the desired results. When the right temperature is reached the syrup is ready to be drawn off, filtered and put in jars. If sugar is desired, the syrup is cooked a little longer. When this syrup is drawn off into a container it is left to harden into a "loaf". Commercial operators have more sophisticated set-ups with a collection system, multi-chambered evaporators, filtering systems and fancy pictorial containers. Maple sugar is now an expensive treat in the form of tiny maple leaves and little soldiers and is no longer the common sweetener in the farm kitchen.

Sugaring off was often the cause for a big party and is still an occasion today, but generally one put on by a commercial enterprise to advertise the modern product by an old fashion means. Even so, it is always fun to gather at the sugarhouse to try "sugar on snow" as you watch the steam billowing from the evaporator and taste the sweet treat that you can only make during the shortest season of the year.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Sheepfest

Once again the Denmark Arts Center will hear the BAA and baa of sheep and lambs as we hold the Second Annual Sheepfest on Saturday April 27<sup>th</sup>. Pens will be set up for the day to hold the sheep waiting to be sheared of their year's growth of wool. Master Shearer Lee Straw will start the first ewe through the shearing process around 11:00 and will continue until they are all shorn and embarrassed to look at each other.



There will be many new aspects to the show this year. Veterinarian Don McLean will give a talk on "Pasturing and Parasites" at 10:00 and will answer your questions about caring for sheep.

He will administer rabies shots to sheep as well. Gabrielle Merrill will talk at 12 noon about "Working Border Collies" and she will have a couple of them with her. Spinners from around the area are invited to bring their wheels and spindles and spend the day. At various times we will be demonstrating several different methods for the preparation of wool for spinning and other ways wool can be used. These include hand carding, drum carding, combing, picking, blending, felting and dyeing. Handspun yarn, knitted hats, socks, sweaters and mittens will be displayed and we will have photographs of different breeds of sheep so that you can see that they come in a variety of sizes,



colors and characteristics. We will have information on breeders, fencing, housing, feeding and raising sheep. If there is something you want to know, just ask. We are sure to have someone who will have the answer or tell you where to find it.

We can always use extra hands to help with sheep wrangling or refreshments. If you would like to join the crew, even for only an hour or so, please call 452-2687. Come all day if you can, 9:30 - 4:00. Then we clean up the hall for the Contra Dance at 7:00!

### Maine Museum Day

The Historical Society will have an exhibit of Denmark History on June 8<sup>th</sup> at the library from 12 Noon until 4pm to commemorate Maine Museum Day. If you have photographs or items that you would like to have included, please call Winnie Moore at 452-2352.

### Third Annual Doll Show

This year's Doll Show will be Saturday, July 29<sup>th</sup> from 9am until 4pm at the Denmark Arts Center. Anyone having dolls to exhibit, wishing to help out, or needing information should contact Sue MacDonald at 452-2196.

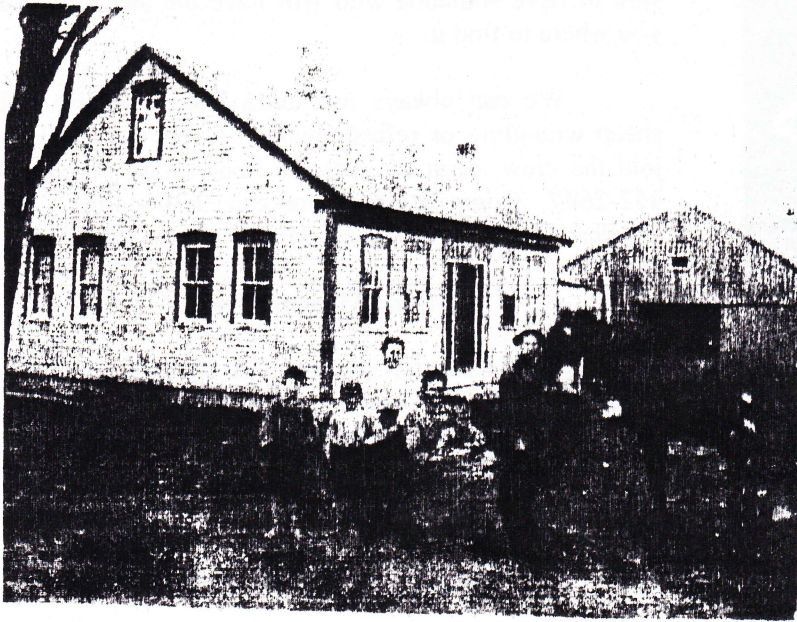
### Membership Reminder

There are a number of members who have not yet paid their dues for the August '95 - August '96 year. This is the only reminder that will be sent. If you wish to remain a member and receive future issues of this newsletter please let us know and send your check today to the Denmark Historical Society, PO Box 803, Denmark, Maine 04022. We appreciate your continued support and enjoy putting this newsletter together for you.

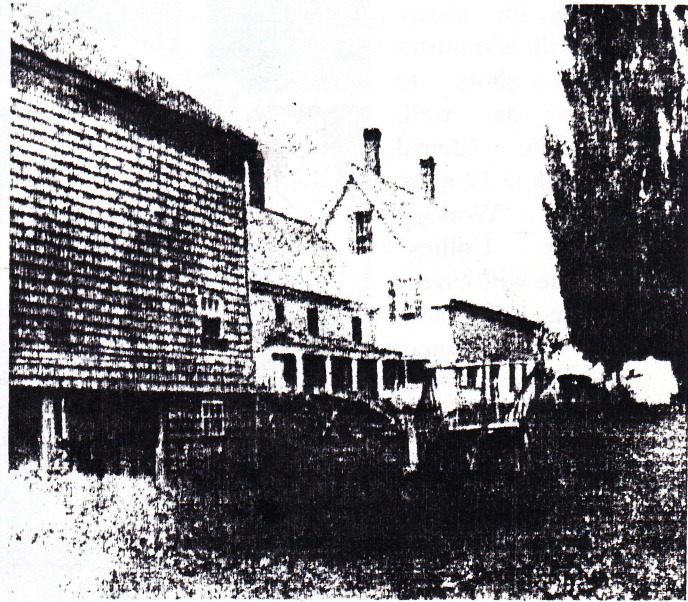
Individual	\$ 5.00
Couple	7.50

*Look for the Denmark Arts Center Summer Schedule coming out soon!*

## Two of Denmark's Early Farms

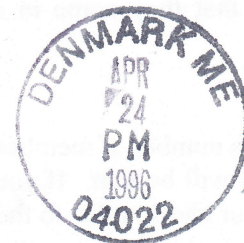


Hale House on Hio Ridge Road in East Denmark. Pictured about 1900. Left to right: Merton, Irving, Addie, Nellie (mother), Florence, the baby and Leroy Hale.



Ralph Hilton Farm in East Denmark, off the Bridgton Road. It was the town poor farm 1895-1905 and was destroyed by fire in 1936.

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