

“Jottings of Walworth Past” – Celebrating the Fourth of July By Robert W. Wignall

Editor’s Note: This story was written prior to 1981 and was recently found in our museum files. The Fourth of July holiday celebrations of the past involved the entire community.

One of the yearly events in Walworth that today is just a memory was the annual Fourth of July celebration. My first recollection of the event goes back to about 1903 or 1904, when Carlyle Boynton and I made elaborate plans to celebrate together, especially in arousing the neighborhood with our noise making before most folks planned on getting out of bed on a holiday.



Above: George and Carrie Wignall, dressed as George and Martha Washington, pose in their horse-drawn carriage with driver George Millen circa 1920. Robert W. Wignall, the author of this story, is their nephew. This photo is on display at the new Tops Friendly Markets, which is located on property once owned by the Wignalls.

The two churches of Walworth took turns putting on the event and it was a real task that required weeks of planning. The first event of the day was usually a baseball game about ten o'clock. In those days our town had a very good team and always planned to win even if they had to hire a pitcher from the league team in Rochester. But we had real good players in our area. A few I can remember were Dan and Clint Lee, Harry Conant, Frank Taber, Charlie Buckley, Ray Blyth, Ray Billings, Howard Mastin, and Ray Carter. Then a bit later others developed into good players like Frank Decker, Cliff and Wes Huntley, Frank Sawyer, Charles Griswold, and many more whose names escape me right now. Henry Bean was the local harness maker and hardware store proprietor, and he had played professional ball with a team in Buffalo. So he was always a great help to the local teams and also umpired all of the games, usually giving the local boys all of the breaks.

After a while a parade took over the place of the morning ball game and it became quite an event with all the local organizations entering floats. A special part of the parade was for children and they really made up quite a large part of the parade. Also the local musicians got together weeks before the big day to practice up on marching music. So altogether the parades were very colorful.

The crowds began to gather in the morning and by noon the village was overflowing with people from far and wide, especially the ones who had left the town years before. So it more or less became an old home day. With the morning events over, the crowds would head for the church where a chicken pie dinner was served and it usually took several seatings to feed all of the hungry folks. And after the sumptuous meal the crowd gathered either in the church or on the lawn, depending on the weather, to listen to an oration by a former preacher or a celebrated orator. The subject of the speech nearly always was the virtues of our great country and her progress as a world power.

After the address there were games for all ages, potato races and three-legged races for the youngsters and two-or-three-mile running races for the more ambitious. Then about three o'clock the high school ball diamond was surrounded by a noisy crowd and the big game of the day was on. Needless to say, the home team had lots of rooters to urge them on.

But the ninth inning end did not result in everybody heading for home. There was still plenty of activity to round out the day. By this time the appetites were whetted again and the church women had just what was needed with another bountiful meal in the church dining room.

By eight o'clock the church auditorium was again filled to capacity with local and visiting folks to enjoy a never-to-be forgotten entertainment. A vocal group of musicians was always ready to do their bit to make up an orchestra. A few names I recall were Cope and Ida Morse, Dr. Edwin Rodenberger and his daughter Beth, Ray Blyth, Harry Conant, and drummer Charlie Griswold. Mrs. Charles Baker, wife of the village grocer, was a music teacher and under her guidance we could always expect a varied program of solos and group features. One such group, of which I was a member, was dressed up like fire crackers with large cardboard red firecrackers complete with rope for a fuse and two small holes to see through. We were marching around the platform to musical accompaniment but Carlyle Boynton missed one turn and fell off from the platform about three feet to the floor. Luckily he was not injured. As I said before, putting on the 4th of July celebration was a real task and after a while got too big to handle and soon became a thing of the past. Even when the two churches worked together for a time it did not bring the old fervor, so finally was given up entirely.