"A HOUSE WHICH I HAD BUILT MYSELF"

by

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and

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Illustrated with the exclusive photographs
of the authors

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DEDICATION

This study is respectfully dedicated to Roland Wells Robbins, without whose help and constructive guidance the gathering of this material would have been impossible.
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INTRODUCTION

From material gathered during his two years residence on the shores of Walden Pond, Henry Thoreau wrote Walden, a book that is becoming recognized as one of the most substantial pieces of American literature. But the fact that he lived there from March 1845 until September 1847, which has not been doubted by even the most sceptical of our historians, did not enable Thoreauvians and historical researchers to easily find the exact site of the house Thoreau lived in. It was not until 100 years later (almost to the day) that the true site was found by Roland Welles Robbins of Lincoln, Mass. We read of this discovery with great interest and excitement. The whole process as Mr. Robbins describes it appealed strongly to our romantic nature, and so it was that we resolved to join in the hunt---what there was left of it---and perhaps unearth some material that one hundred years of literary and historic research had not yet come across. Our labor was rewarding. The exact authenticated history of the Thoreau hut is hereby, to the very best of our knowledge, being set down for the first time in history, and the very fact that we might be contributing something to future students of Thoreauviana has certainly justified in our minds the time and effort put into this study.
PART I

"Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went
down to the woods by Walden pond." This was the beginning
of an experiment and a way of life that his since led thousands
of young men to desert cities, colleges and farms for the simple
existence of life in the woods. A few have found what they were
looking for, others returned disillusioned and bitter from their
experiences. These men have lived in all manner of shelters, some
in lean-tos and cabins they had built themselves, others in deserted
farm houses and barns.

Thoreau, their unintentional leader, lived by the shores of
Walden Pond on a piece of property owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson.
He lived in a house of his own construction, a small, simple
dwelling of shanty boards and plaster containing one window and one
door. He bought the house from James Collins, an Irish railroad
worker, tore it down and transferred it in cartloads to the pro-
posed site of his new home. Before the snows had fallen in the
winter of 1845 Thoreau had moved into the hut. It was a com-
fortable house. He had shingled the outside and plastered the
inside. It was snug and warm with an indoor fireplace. In a
diligent and economic fashion Thoreau had built the house for
$28.12.
PART II

"Thus was my first year's life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6, 1847."

Thereafter the hut was neglected, and even Thoreau makes little mention in his journals of returning to it. He lived for 15 more productive years and finally died at Concord in the Thoreau-Alcott house.

But what became of the hut? Canby writes in his work on Thoreau: "The hut at Walden was left to the chipmunks and the stars. But soon Hugh (Whelan) the gardener, who also had ambitions of his own, moved it to the bean field which he proposed to turn into an orchard, and with eighty dollars borrowed from Emerson he began work on an addition. 'Irish like,' he dug the cellar so close that the old hut began to topple, then got drunk and ran away from both Walden Pond and his wife."

We think it only proper to mention at this point that the site of Thoreau's bean field has never been authenticated. There are, of course, many conflicting versions as to its true locality. If the bean field can be found, then we shall know where Hugh Whelan moved the hut, or if we can find evidence of his digging and evidence of the hut itself at such a place, we could establish the locality of the bean field. Here, however, is an interesting fact: there is only one place today on Emerson's original lot in the woods just north of Walden Pond where there is a depression of such proportions that it could easily be the cellar hole that
Hugh Whelan dug. As yet there has been no excavation at this spot, but it has been ascertained, through examination of the humus within the depression, that the hole is more than fifty years old. If evidence of the hut is found near this place in the form of nails, and particularly plaster that checks under a chemical analysis with that found at the original site of the hut, it will be a rewarding discovery. Not only will the discoverer have found the third site of the Thoreau hut, but he will have found the locality of the bean field as well.

PART III

James Clark was the son of Brooks Clark, a farmer who lived on Carlisle and Easterbrook road just outside the village of Concord. James, who was born in 1815, was evidently more of a student and a philosopher than a farmer, and he seems to have been interested in Thoreau. From a diary or a journal kept by his brother Daniel during these years we learn that James not only took an interest in the man, but also in the hut. In September 1849, two years after Thoreau had left, he moved the hut to his father's farm. The certainty of this transference is recorded in Daniel Clark's diary. On Monday, Sept 3, 1849 Daniel writes: "M 3. Some frost this morning. Drove the horse down to the depot. Andrew and Mrs. Phelps started away, helped James move his building from Walden Pond."

At the age of 39, five years later, James died. Evidently his father had been humoring his son's whim in allowing the hut to remain on his property unused. But on the death of James in
1854 his father used the hut for storing grain. He was a practiced man, and an extra grainery was more important than a memory. We find this verified in Ellery Channing's journals: "The windows were gone in '63, and the plaster mostly cracked off, from the moving to Old Clark's in the N. part of town, very near the opening of the old Carlisle Road. Used as a place to store grain. Visited with Blake and Brown September 11, '64."

Old Brooks Clark died on November 25, 1865 at the age of 90. His wife, Lydia, died two weeks later. All traces of the son Daniel had disappeared, except for the All important journal. In 1866 the farm was sold, and the new owner was one Daniel Sullivan. Sullivan was obviously not impressed with Thoreau, even if he had heard of him, for he turned the house into a piggery, and it was used as such for two years. In 1868 Sullivan tore down the hut and used the rafters to strengthen his barn. This was the tale told to Mr Raymond Emerson, the grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, by Miss Mary Murray, one of Daniel Sullivan's two daughters. The other daughter, Agnes, is living today in Concord. Miss Agnes Murray related how, at the age of 10, she watched her father tear down the remains of the hut at the same site on which it was placed by James Clark. Channing too verifies this story, for in his writings we find, "I saw H's rafters, June 4, 1868, the ruins of his house on the Carlisle road just pulled down." The date is all important, for Agnes stated in 1947 that if her older sister were living then she would be 90 years old. Thus by simple arithmetic if in 1947 Mary would have been 90, then she was born in 1857, thus making her 10 years old in 1868, allowing, of course, that her birthday was nearer January 1858 than January 1857. Ray-
mond Emerson now lives on the old Brooks-Clark farm. Channing
goes on to write: "The house stood in perfect condition so far as
the frame and covering to June 4, 1868, a period of twenty-three
years, and would have lasted a century. It was well built, the
covering being poor."

Thus was the history of Thoreau's house established. The
barn stands today on the Raymond Emerson property containing the
last remains of Thoreau's labor on the shores of Walden.

PART IV

There are, of course, many stories concerning the hut after
Thoreau left it, but probably the most interesting of these is
what we call the Etta Dodge story. It is certainly the best
known.

In preparing his scholarly book on Thoreau, Henry Seidel
Canby visited Mrs. Dodge at her home in Concord. She related how,
when she owned the Clark farm after Sullivan left it, the timbers
from the hut were used in the barn. Apparently Canby misunderstood
her (although he has since corrected himself) and assumed that
these timbers of which she spoke were in the barn or garage at her
present property on Sudbury Road. In his book Canby states, "The
cabin itself was so excellently built that it stood at least two
movings after Thoreau's death, was in perfect condition so far as
frame and covering until 1868, and ended by transubstantiation
into the fabric of a garage." (Canby's Thoreau p 217) Then in the
notes he adds, "The garage is on the estate of Mrs. Willietta Dodge
at Concord."
This story had its consequences. When Canby's book was published and Tenle subsequently followed suit with the story in his illustrated edition of Walden, Mrs. Dodge's garage became a shrine. Visitors streamed to the place, reverently taking pictures and examining every knot hole. Finally, in desperation, she called the library and the antiquarian society and begged them to stop supplying people with this fabulous information. Actually the garage is a comparatively new structure.

In August 1945 Mr. Robbins visited Mrs. Dodge to gather what information he could about the hut. She told him that in 1900 when she lived on the Clark farm some of the timbers and the door of the hut were set inside the barn to the right of the large barn-door. When Mr. Robbins asked her what became of these timbers and the door of Thoreau's hut, she replied that she still had some of the timbers in her possession, but the door had disappeared. She didn't know exactly what had become of it, but she understood that it eventually found its way to Yale University. Robbins's next interview with Mrs. Dodge was on Nov. 6, 1947. When asked again about the door she told a different story. The door, she said, was either used as the door to the closet room in the Clark barn, or stood alone in front of the closet room, she wasn't certain. At present she thought the door was in the Thoreau room of the Antiquarian society in Concord, although this is not the case. Her former story about the door being at Yale University might have arisen from an account, which she related to Robbins at this time, of two timbers supposedly from the Thoreau hut. These timbers, she said, were taken from several that were near the door in the
Clark barn. She saved two, but in time, one became lost. The other she showed to Robbins. It was about two feet long, and possibly four or five inches square. She claimed that the piece was originally twice its present length when it first came into her possession. She said that she had cut it in half and presented one half to Henry S. Canby some years before, and understood that Mr. Canby cut his piece into an inkwell and presented the inkwell to Yale University.

CONCLUSION

In gathering material for this project we came across much information that we could not use here. Not only had we found out what became of the hut, but also learned many other interesting stories, true and otherwise—such as the tale of the fallen British soldiers that Thoreau mentions. But behind all this is the inevitable falsification produced by a hundred years of gossip and legend, and it is often difficult to separate the truth from the imagination. The account which we have presented here has been verified, checked and re-checked until there seems little room for error. It is our hope that it may be of some use.
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