

MEDFORD:

The Early Years, 1844-1944



Edward Palumbo

Written by Mary Gubitosi and Ida Medeck

The Long Island Rail Road - 1844

In the year 1844, when John Tyler was our tenth President and most pioneers were westward bound in search of gold, the Long Island Railroad was developing a shorter route to Boston, Massachusetts through the use of rail and ferry. The Railroad had just completed a new line across central Long Island's undeveloped land filled with scrub oak and pine barrens. The tracks were laid from Long Island City to Greenport. The station house built on Stage Road (now Route 112) in Medford was a regular stop for the wood burning locomotives. Today's Medford was known then as Medford Station.

The land was filled with flat wilderness, no houses or farms, and definitely no areas of employment for our early settlers. In 1850, an auction was advertised to be held at the office of Adrian Muller, 7 Wall Street, New York City to sell land in Medford. Austin Corbin, owner of the Long Island Railroad, tried to develop the barren land but was killed in a carriage accident and his dream of passenger and freight business along the right-of-way was lost.

Medford in the rough was still an important area. While most of the tracks across the Island consisted of a single line, the track in Medford could handle three different trains at one time. Since the train ran only through the center of the Island, all the inhabitants from neighboring towns traveled by stagecoach for their mail and goods delivered to Medford Station. The railroad began expanding in 1872 with a line through Port Jefferson and by 1888 the track to Patchogue was completed.

O.L. Schwenke Land & Investment Co.

In 1899, the O.L. Schwenke Land & Investment Co. was owed \$25,000 by another developer who was unable to pay the debt. Schwenke took Medford land in payment. He soon began a campaign to get city dwellers to relocate to this new land of opportunity.

O.L. Schwenke owned an area of four square miles with a wagon trail as its only road. The trail ran from Patchogue to Port Jefferson and was known as Stage Road. More wagon trails were cut through the wooded areas when the land was

divided into acre lots. The land was later divided several times into smaller lots to make it more affordable to those of limited means. A lot suitable for building was 25' X 100' and was sold for \$30 and more by the New York and Brooklyn Suburban Investment Company. However, O.L. Schwenke plots sold for \$10 to \$30. Those facing the main roadway were \$50 to \$75. An installment plan was available to perspective buyers at \$1 per week and possession was granted as soon as the first payment was made.

Jacob Beck was hired to cut through the woods with a team of oxen to make roads and furrows for future roads. O.L. Schwenke built a house on the northeast corner of Long Island Avenue and Stage Road for the Beck family. This house was later moved to the northwest corner of Long Island Avenue and Route 112. It is still there today and owned by members of the Walter Peithman family. This house is believed to be the oldest house in Medford.

The Nils Larsens came to Medford about the same time as the Becks. They lived in the upper floor of the same house. They had bought property close to the center of the village. However for some reason, O.L. Schwenke wanted this parcel and offered 110 acres on Granny Road as a swap, complete with a very old house of hand-hewn beams and wooden pegs. Here the Nils Larsens settled and raised their family. Descendents of these original settlers lived in the house until 1952. Family records show that early taxes were \$10 per year, which also included the dog license. In those days, there was an appointed tax collector in each village, who went from house to house to collect the taxes, which were then remitted to a central point. Since this was the day when bills were paid in cash, there were occasional difficulties.

Post Office

Correspondence between Lester Davis of Coram (the Town Seat of Brookhaven) and Senator Perry Belmont led to the establishment of Medford's post office. The request was granted in 1886 and George W. Birdsall was appointed first Postmaster of Medford Station. The post office was located in a small one-room building standing on the south side of the railroad tracks across from the White House Hotel. In the years before home delivery, the post office was a haven for communicating, socializing and learning the local gossip. Trains delivered the incoming mail, which was then sorted at 11 a.m. and 7 p.m. It seemed as if everyone including the children were on hand for this big event. Outgoing mail was taken in a two-wheeled pushcart to the train. Anyone sending a letter after closing could easily dash over to the station and hand it to the clerk in the mail car, where it was cancelled and sent on its way.

Postmasters through the years were Joseph Gilbert in 1886, William Case in 1902, Frank Hollmann from 1907 – 1918, Albert Knight in 1918, George J. Roberts until 1924, then R.D. Rider, Mary Morgan, John Schleyer, Gerald Mulderig, Harman Philips, John Cifelli and Arthur Guzzi. The name Medford Station was officially changed to Medford in 1968.

Heads of Households - 1904

In 1904, male heads of households in Medford were Jacob Beck, Ed Wright, station agent, Albert Knight, general store, Frank Hollman, proprietor of the White House Hotel, George Erhardt, proprietor of the White Oak Hotel, Theodore Bopp, grocery store and Justice of the Peace, John Flynn, plasterer, Peter Hofmann, cooper, Jacob Jansen, farmer, A. Lohtz, George Reich, baker, F. Poehland, poultry farmer, John Froese, C. Sauerwalkd, Emil Happach, carpenter, Fred Brinks, dealer in hay and feed, August Hoeffler, "Texas Jack" Pachmann & John Vate.

Within five years, the following familiar names were added: Rowan, Gallagher, Hahn, Zeidler, Schwimmer, Mistler, Watts, Weber, Hoffman, Sauberlich, Thieme, Dege and Theis.

The Hahns and the Zeidler families moved here together in 1906. They built houses side by side on Pennsylvania Avenue. Both families helped Medford grow through their community activities and local businesses. The Hahns were in the carpentry business and the Zeidlers in the well drilling and car business. During World War II, George Zeidler employed up to 105 men in his machine shop making airplane parts.

Hotels

Two hotels had been built to accommodate those families waiting for their homes to be completed. On the south side of the tracks was Frank Hollman's White House Hotel, later known as the Medford Hotel. This building that housed so many of Medford's earliest settlers still stands on its original parcel of land. It was known for many years as the Landmark Café.

When George Erhardt Sr. moved his family from New York to Medford in 1900, he built the White Oak Hotel that stood on the corner of Long Island Avenue and Stage Road. This hotel also became the lodging place for many of our early settlers. Mr. Erhardt's grandson Fred Erhardt of Patchogue recalls his grandfather also served as "tax collector, going door to door to pay the school teachers and at one time was a highway foreman maintaining the road from Patchogue to Port Jefferson." The Erhardt's lived at 479 Long Island Avenue until 1920 when they moved to Patchogue where many descendants of this early Medford family still live. The White Oak Inn was later taken down.

Business

Businesses in Medford began to develop due to promotion by the Long Island Rail Road and the sharp salesmanship of O.L. Schwenke. A dummy factory was set up in the woodland area just far enough from the tracks for the eyes to see it without getting much detail. It consisted of a front exterior and a roof held up on four stilts with a large smokestack. As the train moved through Medford Station, tar paper was burned below the smokestack so black clouds would fill the air. For the people passing in the railroad cars, it looked like a real factory! Newcomers were told of the factory work available in Medford. Sometime later a button factory was located on or near this site.

Medford also had a knitting factory at one time, located on property between Peconic Avenue and the railroad tracks. Sweaters were made there and many of our early neighbors worked at the knitting factory. The factory later moved to Germantown, Pennsylvania. Medforders today speculate on why the button factory moved but no one really knows for sure.

Al Knight, as a young man with his parents, ran the first store in Medford in the area of Robinson Avenue and Medford Avenue. The store sold a huge variety of items from groceries, hay and feed to kerosene, suspenders and roofing material. In 1904, Al Knight bought a one-story building built by George Erhardt, the owner of the White Oak Hotel. In 1906 a second floor was added to the main structure and a north wing added in the 1920's. In 1938, Al Knight died leaving the business to his wife who continued to serve as shopkeeper. In 1940, a second floor above the north wing was added but then was removed before the building was sold in 1948. It is presently located at 84 Ohio Avenue and is owned by Joseph and Anna Knight Hodl. The original store served as a shoemakers shop and later a flower shop which today remains as a flower shop called Medford Design Florist. Much of the building has remained the same with its projecting four pane windows on the first floor, the second floor extension and three bay gable roof. This building is one of the two oldest surviving commercial structures in Medford.

Many remember the old railroad station with its hand-operated signal to warn of oncoming trains. Passersby could see the station agent operating the telegraph key through the bay window. A potbelly stove heated the waiting room and there was always a handy supply of wood so that early morning commuters could make a quick fire. The first train left at 6:15 am with many who worked in New York City aboard. In the 1920's a monthly commutation ticket cost about \$16. The station agent and his family lived in the quarters behind the station. There was always a neat and attractive vegetable garden there. The pink rambler roses covering the fence made a pretty picture for train passengers. The grade crossing beside the station was a hazard and those crossings the tracks had to remember that train time was all the time. In 1927 there was a fatal accident at the crossing. Jacob Mistler was killed as he was driving his car across the tracks to take his family to a waiting bus. Flashing lights were installed at the crossing and finally, in 1940, the grade crossing was eliminated and an overpass was built. The old station was demolished. In its place was a neat brick building built on top of the overpass where one had a bird's eye view of the village. However no agent was kept in residence at the new site resulting in destructive vandalism to the station. The Long Island Rail Road removed the vandalized station.

Hal & Edith Fullerton

The railroad was still interested in promoting Long Island and in 1905 established a Demonstration Farm with Hal B. Fullerton as the director. He was asked to select the worst area of Long Island to prove that successful crops could be produced. His first choice was Wading River. Fullerton planted crops suitable for the marketplace on the ten worst acres and an additional eight acres were used as an experimental dairy.

Hal and his wife Edith Loring Fullerton lived in Huntington and traveled daily to the farm. They named this experimental farm "Peace & Plenty." With an abundance of food produced in the first year and over 380 varieties for the farmers market, Hal Fullerton started what became known as the "home hamper." A long, flat crate with small baskets of fruit and vegetables packed inside were shipped by rail directly to consumers. He even started a mail-order market.

With his first farm so successful, Fullerton was asked to start another in the center of Long Island. In 1907, the railroad purchased eighty acres in Medford on Long Island Avenue, then known as Sand Road, opposite Manor Road and east of Stage Road. Fullerton thought this land showed less potential than the North Shore farm did. With all this sand, Fullerton knew he had a big job ahead of him. He liked Medford and named this Experimental Station Number 2 "Prosperity Farm." It too was quite a success with much of its produce winning notable recognition from the agricultural department. The farm each year exhibited its produce in the Suffolk and Nassau County Fairs and was a consistent Blue Ribbon Winner. Here every type of crop was raised including such oddities as sugar beets and Chinese vegetables.

Hal Fullerton was a knowledgeable photographer and kept a graphic record of the Farm. The Hal B. Fullerton photography collection is now at the Suffolk Historical Museum in Riverhead. The glass negatives are most interesting to see.

At the request of the President of the Long Island Rail Road, the Fullertons began writing a booklet for prospective

land buyers letting them know of farming's great potential on Long Island. It was called the Long Island Agronomist and later became a subscription pamphlet for all those future farmers in need of professional advice. When the first booklet came off the press of the local printer it read, "Publication Office, Medford, Long Island." The Agronomist had 16,000 subscribers worldwide when Fullerton ceased publication in 1914.

Traveling from Huntington to both farms coupled with the long hours of work was exhausting for the Fullertons. In June 1910, after much planning, the Fullerton family moved into a five-room home at Prosperity Farm. Mr. Fullerton was a well-respected gentleman and accepted many guests to the farm. Shortly after they moved to Medford, Teddy Roosevelt visited them on his whistle-stop campaign of Long Island. Medford residents were all out for the special event. George and Ferde Mistler shook his hand at Medford Station.

Hal Fullerton, an advocate for women's rights, made a statement by having his wife Edith drive Teddy Roosevelt, Ralph Peters, President of the LIRR and Hal on a tour to show off their two experimental farms. In 1927 the Medford Demonstration Farm ceased operations and was sold to a private party.

Through the Fullerton and LIRR farming effort, the Medford Grange Patrons of Husbandry No.1324 was established to aid local farmers. The Grange spread the latest agricultural information and news, made group purchases such as fertilizer and coal and served as a local social center. In 1916 Arthur Sauberlich built the Grange Hall on Long Island Avenue for meetings and community programs. The Harvest Festival every fall was a big event with local vegetables and fruits for sale or auction, home baked goods and cider available, followed by dancing in the beautifully decorated Hall.

The Home Bureau was organized in 1919 in the Grange Hall through the efforts of Mrs. Edith Fullerton, Mrs. Mary Morgan and a few other women in the community. County demonstration agents from the Home Extension Bureau in Riverhead came and taught instruction in the latest methods of cooking, family nutrition, dressmaking and various handicrafts. Mrs. Martha Theis lead the Medford Home Bureau from 1935 until its termination in 1964. Currently the Home Extension carries out the work in a revised manner.

As agricultural pursuits lessened, interest in the Grange dwindled and membership dropped to the point where the Hall, which some years before had been enlarged, could not be carried. It was sold to the Henry Jones Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which continues to maintain it.

Education & Scouting

A private house served as the first school with about 14 students. Children walked to school from whatever point in Medford that they lived, in some instances it was a matter of miles. They did not feel underprivileged as all their neighboring friends had to do the same. In 1903 a small school was built on the northwest corner of Peconic Avenue and Route 112 with Miss Jessie Walker as first teacher. In 1908 a wing was added and Miss Jeannette Stark of Yaphank was the teacher. She married the station agent and so became Mrs. Edward Wright. The schoolhouse was divided by folding doors with four grades in each room so students could listen to what was being taught in other classes as well as their own. Amenities of school life consisted of a water pump in the side yard and outhouses in the rear. The tower bell rang for opening time and recess. A well-remembered privilege was being the one to ring the bell. Field days were enjoyed with the Yaphank and Farmingville schools. Students were transported to the octagon-shaped school in Yaphank where athletic events were held on the shores of the lake. As the population grew, the "New School" was built on the southeast corner of Jamaica Avenue and Route 112 and was dedicated on Labor Day 1923.

Scouting played a large part in the lives of Medford's children. Hal Fullerton began the first Boy Scout troop in 1917. During World War I they helped sell Liberty Bonds and also had a Fife and Drum Corps that played at many community events. Later a Girl Scout troop was formed. Fullerton set up the Medford Scouts Library on his retirement in 1927 at the New School. Unfortunately this book collection was destroyed in a basement flood.

Churches

St. Sylvester's is the oldest church in Medford and held its first services about 1910 in an outbuilding on John Flynn's property on Waverly Avenue. Its first building of white clapboard was located at the corner of Long Island Avenue and Route 112. As the congregation grew, the building was expanded by cutting it in half, moving the two halves apart and inserting a new section between them. In the 1950's a carnival was held across from the church to raise money for the new building that was built on Ohio Avenue. A newer Parish Hall was completed in the early 1990s.

St. Mark's Episcopal Church was founded in 1920 as a mission parish. The building that stands on Jamaica Avenue was built in 1929 with a later addition to the rear.

World War I

During World War I, many Medford boys served in the European theater. At home, George Roberts started the *Medford Villager* newspaper to promote a village improvement society. This failed, but the newspaper he began in the late 1920's, the *Long Island Villager*, was successful. The paper covered Medford and nearby villages and was printed in the back of the old Post Office next to Knight's store.

The idea of a village improvement society was replaced by the Medford Taxpayers and Civic Association that still exists today. Also in the 1920's, the Medford Community Hall was built for social events and school graduations with funds raised through the sale of stock. Its weekly dances were a huge success. The Corporation dissolved in 1974 and the building was sold to Harry Themann for his Brau Haus. The Henry E. Steinway Unit No. 66 of the Steuben Society of America held their fraternal meetings there. At the same time, the Medford Athletic Club was organized for baseball and basketball with a clubhouse built on Route 112.

Fire Department

Fires were always a hazard in Medford's brush and pitch pine surroundings. In the early days, any local folks who were available fought fires. In 1923, a group of men got together and formed a volunteer fire department. Shortly thereafter a second group organized for the same purpose. There was competition to make each group larger and stronger. However cooler heads prevailed and the two groups united to create our present fire department that the community is justly proud for providing our excellent fire protection.

Medforders commuted by bus to Patchogue as many of them worked at the Lace Mill and Bailey's Lumber Mill. The early buses were the small jitney type where passengers sat on each side facing each other. The 6:30 am bus took workers to the mills and other businesses but many people rode bicycles back and forth all year round.

In the early 1930's Clinton Finger, Louis Finger and William Wingerath established the Island Coal and Lumber Company at the station between the railroad and Long Island Avenue. The business flourished from the start. Owned and operated by local men, it was always a pleasure to do business there. Many Medford men found employment in this lumberyard. Later the business was sold to Triangle Pacific.

World War II

During World War II the Send Off Committee was formed in Medford to keep in touch with servicemen abroad. Supplies and goodies were sent to the troops in Europe. A roll of honor was maintained in front of the V.F.W. Hall but was later moved to the corner of Long Island Avenue and Route 112. William Toth was the only Medford serviceman who was killed in the line of duty. The pocket park formed by Route 112, Ohio Avenue and Robinson Avenue has a commemorative marker honoring William and was renamed Toth Square. At the conclusion of the war, the wooded property on the corner of Peconic Avenue and Route 112 was purchased for a memorial to honor all Medforders who served in the Armed Forces. This beautiful wooded spot was complete with monument, flagpole and benches. The flag at the park was raised and lowered each day for many years by volunteers such as Margaret and Jean Conklin, Margaret and Edward Cornell and Nick Cassella. Another group of volunteers formed the Medford Memorial Park Committee that oversees the upkeep of the park and is made up of representatives from each organization in the village. Meetings were held every spring and fall. The park grows more attractive with each passing year and more meaningful as fewer and fewer green spots remain on Route 112. Each holiday season many residents gather around the evergreen tree with its lights aglow offering peace, joy and goodwill to all.

The first one hundred years of Medford's growth from 1844 to 1944 were a cornerstone for our fine town. One can look at Medford in a different light knowing the struggles and sacrifices our early settlers made for the betterment of our community.