

Herb

by Pam Bell

It was the middle of April, 1972, past the peak of mud season, but not yet Spring, when we first drove up Libby Road. The fields beside the road were mostly bare but here and there were patches of snow and along the road there were still snow banks piled up by the passing plow trucks during the preceding winter months.

We were on our way to look at a house we'd seen advertised in The Maine Times: a 100 year-old Cape on a dead-end dirt road. About half way up the road, we passed an elderly man in green rubber boots, blue pants, a short green winter jacket and a green cap. He stood off to the side of the road on the snow bank and held onto the collar of a shaggy black and tan dog. This was our first glimpse of Herb Libby, the man from whom we would buy our farm. The man who would become one of the most important people in our lives.



Pam Bell

Herb Libby was the epitome of neighborliness. When we moved to Leeds, Herb, who was 82, had been driving one of his son Raymond's dump trucks fifty hours a week, hauling-in at Blue Rock. But when we moved in, Raymond hired Bruce, my husband, to drive the truck, and Herb took on the job of introducing me to Leeds. We covered a lot of miles that first summer. We drove to Hartford and Sumner, Turner and Greene, stopping here and there for a lunch. Herb told me about every culvert we crossed for much of the road had been his responsibility when he worked as a patrolman for the state. Herb got a kick out of squiring around a young lady, and I'll never forget the expression on his face when he introduced me to Carl Geores, our minister, at Rose and Pratt's store in North Leeds. Herb was sure that Carl noticed he was riding with another man's wife!

That was the way our life in Leeds started, with a job and friendship from our neighbors. Over the years there was a steady stream of companionship and help. Those first years, the stream ran pretty much one way, east from the Libbys' across the road to the Bells'. Herb and I walked our road every day. His old dog, Fred, and my puppy, Eben, kept us company as Herb pointed out the sights. He showed me where the mayflowers grew and told me of picking them when he was a boy. We spent long hours picking blueberries and raspberries. Standing among the prickles, he told me of hitching up the horse and wagon on a summer's day and going with his mother and his wife, Sadie and the children to pick blueberries in the bog by the old Will Libby place. He told me about his youth, and he taught me the history of Leeds as it used to be.

And what did we do for the Libbys? I think we mostly provided amusement in those early years. I know Herb had a good laugh when I excitedly announced that

my peas were up, just days after I had planted them in my first vegetable garden. Herbie dutifully climbed the hill to look at them and pointed out to me that what was popping up all over the garden was pigweed and mustard, not peas! He shook his head in disbelief when we brought home our first workhorse, especially since she was a work horse who had never been worked. After experiencing a few flying trips around our garden, hanging on to the handles of the plow while Bruce tried to hold the horse, after seeing Bruce and the horse race across the fields and down the road, bits and pieces of harness flying off with every step, Herb pronounced her “a good-looking mare, but notional.” And notional she was; her notion of working in harness was to do it at a run, and if the going got tough, to sit down. Herb good-naturedly helped us teach her a thing or two, and undoubtedly went home knowing just why he had traded his last team of horses for the tractor back in 1952. The mare, sadly, is long gone, but the tractor is still on the farm.

When we had children, a new dimension was added to our relationship with Herb. Bruce’s and my parents lived too far away for the boys to see much of them, and Herb became the perfect substitute grandparent. When Nat was two, I’d walk him to the edge of the road, help him across, and then watch him go up to Herb’s door. When Herb answered it, Nat would shout, “Herb, cookie!” Herb always had a supply of oyster crackers on hand and would pass Nat the box. Herb babysat for the boys. He took them on outings to McDonald’s and Cote’s Ice Cream. He watched their baseball games. When they went to school, Nat and Ben would wait for the bus each morning over at Herb’s, discussing how the Red Sox were doing and helping themselves to the candy from the bowl on his counter. Herb was unceasingly tolerant and his house was a refuge for Nat and Ben when Bruce and I got too picky at home. He gave them loyal support and a lot of love.

It’s been thirty years now since we moved to the town of Leeds. We have never doubted it was the best move we could have made in 1972. Living across the road from the Libbys has made our lives much richer than it could possibly have been.

Herb Libby died in 1991 at the age of 100, ever the gentleman, ever the friend, ever the very best of neighbors. We miss him terribly even now, eleven years later.



"I've lived with my family on our farm in Leeds for almost thirty years. I work part time at the local golf course and am on the school board and the board of RCAM, a local service agency. My interests include reading, writing and gardening."

—Pam Bell

Pam Bell is an active participant in an on-going Turning Memories Into Memoirs® Workshop led by Denis Ledoux that meets every other week. Other lifewriters in the workshop range in age from mid-thirties to mid-eighties.