

The article below is a reproduction of a webpage of Colgate University's magazine "The Colgate Scene" that was published in January 1998. The article recalls the life of Dayton Levi Birchard, who had died 18 November, 1997. Dayton had graduated from Colgate in 1928. Dayton was a longtime officer and researcher in the Stone Reunion, and was instrumental in restoration efforts at both the Birchardville Cemetery and the Stone Street Cemetery where many of his ancestors and family are buried.

THE COLGATE SCENE **ON-LINE**

As time goes by



Dayton Birchard '28 was laid to rest among five generations of his family in a cemetery he provided for and maintained. Across the road that runs through Birchardville is the home where he grew up and the store he tended as a boy and had kept as a museum in recent years. Shortly before his death last November, Dayton talked about his remarkable life, prelude to a profound legacy.

by John D. Hubbard

It used to take five hours in a horse-drawn lumber wagon to travel the 18 miles from Birchardville to Montrose over and around the endless mountains of Pennsylvania.

Dayton Birchard, who was educated in a one-room schoolhouse that still sits on a rise above the small village settled by his ancestors, made the trip every week to attend high school. He shared space with egg cases, rolls of butter and dressed poultry bound for the train to Scranton.

The hired man picked up dry goods for the return trip to the store the Birchard family ran back home and Dayton settled

into a Montrose rooming house where he spent the week — \$5 for room and board — while going to high school.

Dayton Birchard tells the story and many more as he sits in a comfortable chair in his Montrose home. Outside, the stubborn leaves on a young maple are brilliant yellow, catching the equally stubborn November sun.

It was nineteen hundred and ten and Dayton was five years old when his father Fred bought a general store at the "wide place in the road" that was Birchardville. The area was known as Ruby when it was measured out by Connecticut surveyors and settled in 1799 by Birchard's ancestors from New England. They established farms on the plot, which was one mile north and south by two miles east and west.

"I grew up on the farm and in the store," says Dayton. His brother still keeps sheep and Scottish cattle just down the road from the store, which Dayton maintains as a museum. Upstairs, in the former Grange hall, the family — 40 strong — gathers still for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Across the road is a Baptist church and the cemetery, also maintained by Dayton.

Back in its heyday the store sold "everything the heart could desire" — from bolt cloth to harrowers — and there were times during the year when there would be 100 farmers at the creamery.

Today, the shelves are still stocked with vintage products. "The collection of wooden boxes would be as hard to duplicate as anything," says Birchard as he leans against the counter. Sure enough, vanilla, prunes, breakfast cocoa, Elkhorn cheese, even yeast foam all came packed in wooden boxes. Much of the other merchandise was sold out of tins: Snowdrift Coconut, Cream Dove Shortening, Sweet Mist Tobacco and a variety of oysters — Sealshipt, Queen's Choice and Perch Creek.

Hardware and dry goods abound and hard-to-find items, too, such as Jiffy Louse Killer and Dr. Hess Heave Powder are in stock. It is hardly a stretch at all to imagine patrons gathered round the potbellied stove sharing the news of Birchardville.

With his four years of high school drawing to a close, Dayton Birchard wasn't thinking about college, but the father of

classmate Philip Cooley had an idea. Phil had plans to study to be a surgeon in New York State. "In order to get to Hamilton College in Clinton we have to go through the village of Hamilton where Colgate is, and I think it will be a little less difficult to get in there." Mr. Cooley, with an eye to cutting his travel in half, had planted a seed.

"It was the spring of '24 and my father and I were in the field. He was on a load of hay and I was pitching it up to him and he said, 'Dayton, I think we can manage to send you to college.'"

Dayton Birchard leans forward. "I took the roughest course we had. Does the name James Shortliffe mean anything to you? I took every economics course he taught."

Why?

"Well, I'm no scientist. I didn't care for languages and I certainly didn't care for the math courses. I had trouble with Twister Smith."

The first two years were hardest. "I made a mistake," says Birchard, "and I've cautioned my grandson about this. I took too many advance courses in high school and I was put in with these fellas who came up from those finishing schools in New York. I was out to sea."

Birchard graduated, of course, "by the grace of God and Fred Jones." It was Professor Jones who helped Dayton through the required nine hours of French and identified the root of his problem with languages — his hearing.

"That saved me, and my last two years I had a lovely time."

Darker days loomed, though.

"Sir, there was no work. I hope college graduates are never faced with what faced us in 1928, '29, '30." Career opportunities were nil and job prospects were slim. Birchard managed to hire on as a driver for a veterinarian who was testing cattle for tuberculosis. "I helped herd the cows, and if necessary I hung on to them when the vet gave them the hypodermic. It was the first money I ever earned, and hard work for a college graduate."

As that summer ended, Birchard fell into a trip out west, bankrolled by the money he made wrestling cattle. "My mother nearly fainted when I told her. In those days when you went to California you didn't come back."

Dayton did return, however, after spending just a week on the West Coast — turns out his traveling companion only wanted to put his feet in the Pacific Ocean. Dayton had seen plenty on the way out, however. The dust storms had started, there were "For Sale" signs everywhere and jobs were scarce even in the Golden State.

"I did a precious lot of thinking. That trip was worth a college semester," says Dayton, who decided to pass on the one offer he had to sell Singer sewing machines and return home. He then asked his father to stake him to half a year at Columbia to pursue a masters in education. It was agreed and Dayton set off again, to further his studies in New York.

Back then the store opened at 5 a.m. when the breadman arrived, and one morning he came with news someone had passed along to him on the docks of the Russell Spaulding bakery in Binghamton. Dayton, who was home from Columbia, was told there would be a job opening at the Upper Willow Point School in New York State's Vestal district.

"You mean to tell me you are a Colgate graduate and a candidate for a masters from Columbia and you are willing to teach in a one-room school?" ran the line of questioning from the superintendent, who nonetheless knew of no opening.

Less than a week later, the Willow Point teacher resigned and Dayton, who never learned the identity of the man with the tip at the Spaulding bakery, had a job.

"I taught eight grades for two years. By the fall of 1931 Birchard took a cut in pay to return to Montrose High School. "I taught 20 years. Social studies for 20 years, and in 1951 I became principal for 19 years. That makes a total of 41 years," says Birchard, who retired in 1970.

"As far as the boys and girls are concerned it was a very pleasant experience. I wouldn't exchange it for anyone's profession."

During those years Dayton married Francis, the couple had a daughter, Jessie, and he never strayed too far from the farm. His ties to Birchardville remain equally strong. In addition to the store, Dayton's interest in the cemetery has led to dramatic results. He began a program to raise funds to address the graveyard's woeful state. "I hope you won't think I'm bragging, but not many country cemeteries have \$125,000 in invested funds. It's about the only use I ever made of Shortliffe's economics."

Each of the 1,200 grave sites are tidy with stones that stand straight, all inside a white picket fence. "It isn't better kept than every cemetery ought to be," says Dayton, looking out at his history from under the wide brim of a straw hat, to the place where his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather and great-great-great-grandfather rest.

Birchard also has turned the old school house into a museum. It is there among the rows of wooden desks with intact inkwells Dayton pauses for a moment.

"I'll tell you my final story," says Birchard, as visitors admire a chest of drawers, each containing items dedicated to various subjects. "On Fridays classes would end at 3 and we would lay aside our books and pass around the drawers. They were our only visual aids."

Dayton Birchard takes delight in sharing his past and telling his stories. The clouds are thickening above Birchardville but the light is lovely where the road widens and time passes but not with great speed.

The outpouring was warm and full of admiration for Dayton Birchard. "He was a vessel to do whatever God wanted him to do," said Jessie of her father. She and her husband have plans to continue Dayton's preservation efforts.

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