

Biography of Clara Dickinson Weeks Historian of Woodsville Union High School

by Madeline Weeks Kirk

Clara Dickinson Weeks, who has done the research, pertinent to, and the writing of “ A History of the Woodsville Union High School District” is now in her 83rd year. She was born December 3rs, 1870 in Barnet, Vermont, the eldest daughter of Curtis and Florinda Dickinson and granddaughter of Nathaniel Dickinson mentioned in the school history as a member of the town’s first school board. Her father, as a youth, lived in one of Woodsville’s oldest houses on Ammonoosuc street (#38). He attended school in the first schoolhouse at the foot of Clay Hill, on South Court Street.

Clara Dickinson’s earliest ambition was to become a school teacher, a goal not easily achieved in an era when schools were few and far apart and the education of women was of relatively minor importance. She attended the village schools of Barnet and took further preparation at McIndoes and St. Johnsbury Academies.

In the 1880’s and early ‘90’s it was not necessary for a girl to be a High School graduate to become a teacher. The requirements seemed to be that the teacher should be slightly older (this was not always the case) and somewhat more advanced educationally than her students. However, each teacher was required to pass an examination given by a County Superintendent of Schools, who subsequently made frequent checks on their work. At the age of 17, she became a teacher. The State offered two weeks of Normal School training for its teachers and she attended these sessions each year.

It was a practice of this early period to transfer teachers each year from one school to another, so that no teacher remained longer than one school year in the same place. Therefore, Miss Dickinson had varied experience, having having taught at Joe’s Brook, Waterford, Barnet, East Barnet and Passumpsic, all in Vermont.

In 1894, she was engaged to take charge of the primary department in Woodsville. This was a long and rather awesome step, as it meant moving from a four grade room of twenty five pupils to a much larger school which boasted between sixty and seventy children in the primary grades. At Woodsville, she was assisted two hours each day by a High School student, Miss Belle Fox. Clara Dickinson remained as primary teacher until 1898 when she married Dr. F. G. Weeks, Woodsville’s first resident dentist.

The rearing of six children, all of whom attended Woodsville schools, brought an end to her school teaching career, but intensified her interest in school affairs. She served as a member of the School Board from 1907 to 1910 and was influential in bringing the appointment of our first school superintendent. Two of her nine grandchildren are graduates of Woodsville High School and three great grandchildren are now growing to school age.

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In addition to her constant interest in the schools, Mrs. Weeks has been active in many other fields of community enterprise. Gifted with an excellent soprano voice, she sang in the choir, taught Sunday School and was a faithful worker in the Universalist Church for many years. She is the past President of the original Woodsville Women's Club and served tirelessly in their many fine causes, such as the establishment of a Milk Fund for undernourished children, the clinic for immunizing children against Diphtheria and she was a member of the committees sponsoring these movements. She was also active in the development of the Community field and the planting of the maples, which now border the field. For several years she was Chairman of the Committee which produced the Club's excellent annual flower shows.

At what most people would call retirement age, Mrs. Weeks assumed another job; that of dental assistant to her husband, who was in failing health and worked with him until his retirement in 1940, after 46 years of service to the community.

If, as my mother's biographer, I may be permitted a brief paragraph of my own, I would like to say she entered into the project of writing a history of the Woodsville schools with a youthful heart and enthusiasm to match. She has searched her memory, which is amazingly accurate. She has done research among town histories and town reports and garnered her facts carefully. She has interviewed "old timers" and explored many avenues for authentic information, and despite her years has been as happy as a school girl, in doing so.