

[Further interview with Arthur Botsford]

W1504

Typed

F Donovan-Thomaston

Monday, Nov.7 '38

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“There were two places in town and one in Plymouth where they used to make clock parts—not the complete article, understand—but just parts. I guess they sold to Seth Thomas, yes I presume likely that was the principle market. One of the factories was owned by Sam Sanford over there on the corner of the street that's named after him 'Sanford avenue.'

“They made pendulum rods, wire bells, and verses there. I remember when old Sam got killed. Up off High street there used to be a quarry [and?] Sam and Ed O'Connell were up there quarrying out flag stones. I worked over in the Movement shop at the time, and from the top floor you could see way over the hills. All that part that's Judson street, and Walnut street and upper High street now was just bare hillside and it was in the fall of the year; and from the top windows of the movement shop you could see all the people scurrying and gathering like ants. Looked as if the whole town was there.

“They was both killed, Sam died right away and Ed O'Connell died before they could git him home. We went up afterwards [?] to look the place over and there was still people there talking and looking, gathered in little knots. Seems as though they had cut from the wrong side, in order to git done a little quicker, and they didn't git out from under in time and the [?] stone fell on them.

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“But I don't know's you want [?] to hear about all that. Then there was Ransom Sanford and his sons made verges in a little place up on Railroad street; and then up on the top floor of the Shelton carriage shop in Plymouth they manufactured [?] verge escapements for clocks — but I don't know who was in charge.

“My father came here in '47 from South Britain. [?] I can remember hearing him tell about the first railway through these parts [?] and how he and some [?] others walked all the way from south Britain to [?] 2 down around Seymour, or some such place, to see the first train. My dad worked for Sanford four years after he came here and then he got a job in the clock shop and worked there till he died.

“Seth Thomas—you talk about fables and I'll tell you [?] what always used to pass for gospel truth but I think its a fable—Seth Thomas, they said, came here [?] afoot from Wolcott, where he was born carrying all his belongings in a bandana knotted at the end of a stick. And they said—though I don't say this couldn't be done, mind you—they said he whittled the first clock he ever made with a [?] jack-knife—whittled the whole darn thing entire.” [?] At this point Mr. Botsford produced a tiny peach stone, [?] whittled into the semblance of a monkey. It was a creditable piece of work and he was obviously proud of it.)

“If a man could do that,” said he, “why couldn't he whittle clock parts?”

“Anyway, I, don't know what Seth's circumstances were when he come [?] here, but before he died he [?] he owned pretty darn near the whole town. I can remember my dad telling about the big general store he ran up near the center of town. You paid for what you got once a year. At the end of that time, some of them [?] owed him money, the ones that worked for him, I mean; they'd et more than they'd earned. Sure, he took it out of their wages. Oh, he sold to others, too, man didn't have to work for him to trade there. The post office was kept in that store too.

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“It burned down, the whole building, in 1877. Seth died in '59. And when he died he owed plenty, not only buildings, but land and stock. The side hills was dotted with his sheep and cattle, he owned all the land around Marine and Lichfieldstreets [?] and down Grand street and through the center of the town.

“Of course there was other big landowners, too, and parcels here and there. There was the Alcotts, and R T Andrews, and [?] the Blakeslees, and across the river was the potter place—they had a factory over in back there, the Potters [?] did, where they manufactured guns—didn't know they was guns made in the 3 place and the Woodwards and the Judsons on High street. But all they owned wasn't a patch on Seth's property.

“Seth had Aaron, and Seth and Edward and three girls, near's I can remember. Bill Woodruff's mother was one of the girls, she was a Thomas And Ed Thomas had Walter and three girls, and all these kind of married [?] with the other prominent families in town. Miles Morse, him that ran the clock shop I told you about the other day, he married one of them. They called him “Squire Morse! After he give up the clock business, he started up the knife shop, down to Reynolds' Bridge, and he lived in that big house they call the Mansion, right across the river, you can see it from the main road. Afterwards he built the big place in the center of town that [?] was torn down this summer.

“I guess I told you most of the history of the company that I can remember. In the early seventies, they bought out the A S Hotchkiss Tower Clock Company of Williamsburg, N Y. For a while they manufactured these clocks and called 'em the A. S Hotchkiss tower clockmade by Seth Thomas, but after Hotchkiss died, he stayed with the company you see, they dropped his name.

“Now I remember they manufactured a clock for some South American country—I think it was Peru, or Bolivia, or Ecuador—anyway, they had to put that clock up in small parts, not to exceed a certain metric [?] weight, and shipped in tin boxes, all soldered. They went by steamer to a point on the Amazon river and then by llama over the Andes mountains.

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“Each part was marked so's it could be put together in a monastery up there in the mountains. The monks had to do it themselves. I remember after it was up and running, the monks wrote a [?] letter to the company officials telling how they'd got it going. It was all in the papers, but I suppose most people have forgotten about it now. I don't remember what year it was.

“Then there was them two clocks they made for colgate—th first one had a 40 foot dial and the second one a 50 footer. I think I told you abou 4 them. The folks in the Movement shop were certainly proud of them. They had a picture taken, I got it around here somewhere, with all the help lined up [?] alongside the hands.

“You asked me about that entry in the ti e book concerning the beginning of the ten hour day—” Mr. Botsford got out his book and turned to the page on which it was written—” On the morning of [?] Sept. 5, [?] 1864, it was a Monday—the shop began to work 10 hours a day in compliance with the new law—I think it was a state law.

“Before [?????] the war they could work the help any hours they had a mind to. The clock shop worked 11 hours a day, as a rule, and the cotton mill 14.”

The average rate of pay, according to several of these old timers whom I have questioned, in the seventies and eighties, was about twenty cents an hour, and that indeed, was considered “good.” One old fellow said he'd worked 11 hours a day as a teamster for the company at this wage, [?] carting heavy brass ingots to and from the rolling mill, and [?] thought he [?] was lucky to get it. He said he paid only ten dollars a month rent, and other living expenses were commensurately low.

Mr. E. R. Kaiser told me that his father, learning his trade in Germany, had had to get up at 4:30 in the morning, work until 6:30 without breakfast—then take half hour off for something to eat [md]work until noon and another half off—and work until six o'clock at night.

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