

Marstons Mills Historical Society
Interview with Thom Gifford
(by Jim Gould & David Martin)
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I was born in Hyannis on August 17, 1941 and never left the Mills 'til I was 53--one of those people who are stuck here. I was named George Thomas Gifford Jr. after my father, but my mother didn't like "junior". My father was named for his godfather George Thomas. I remember he had a long white beard and lived on Route 28--the house that was moved to Oyster Harbors from just east of old Post Road. The Gifford Farm is on the left side of Route 149 going north. It was a dairy farm with 32 cows. The barn was taken down in the 1960s by a man named Gifford from Sippewissett. There was a slaughterhouse in the back. The building still stands. The house had been a stop for stagecoaches and folks traveling to Cotuit.

My mother was Elsie L. Gundberg — she was of Swedish background. She lived in New Bedford and got a summer job at a summer place here on North Bay. My father offered her a ride in the old farm truck one day, and that was it. Besides working on the farm mother worked at Lynxholm, the summer home of Lincoln Filene. She was the pastry cook for Rod-Mar Lodge for many years.

I went to the Elementary School in the building on Route 28. That building is now a Funeral Home about a mile west. Once the teacher asked us to bring something you like, and I brought my sister for show and tell! Then four years to the old junior high, and then two years at the "new" high school; it has really expanded in recent years! I took auto-mechanics but shortly became a carpenter.

I grew up in the house across the street from the Fire Station at Route 149 and Lovell's Lane. I lived there until I was 18. Some of my cousins are Bob Parker and Claire Parker Melix. My father ran the farm there, which he bought from his father. After taxes it earned only \$20 a year. Although sometimes we had potatoes and onions for dinner, we never wanted for food because of the farm. There was a sandpit where Ball and Boyd is today. There was a chicken house at the top of the hill. My father had wanted to put in a gas station, but the gasoline company wouldn't give him a decent deal. He gave up farming and drove heavy equipment for John Doherty; he also welded and fixed up things. He also unloaded grain from the railroad station at West Barnstable; I remember helping him, and we delivered it to different houses along Route 149 as we came home. Dad spent the remainder of his life as a respected carpenter and advised many on methods and materials.

I have a sister Nora, named after grandmother Nora Gifford. Sister Nora married Peter Eldridge who was in the Navy, on nuclear subs, and died young. They had 3 children, 2 boys and a daughter who lived in Preston, Conn. My half-sister was born before my parents' marriage and was raised by another family in New Bedford who knew my mother. She married David Haig and lived in Worcester and had two sons.

Growing up, we got away with some pranks as kids. I don't remember when I didn't have a gun. We shot woodchucks, rabbits, and deer. My cousin Bob Parker was a better shot, but one day we were out hunting partridge. I was coming up one side of a hill and he on the other side, and he shot toward me—it grazed my left arm. That was out by Whistleberry, near Run Pond. Bob and his family lived at the farm at one time. We used to go fishing; one day, Bob caught me on the cheek when he was practicing casting his new gear. I wasn't much for shellfishing. Times are different today about property. Back then, no one objected to someone walking across their land. It's like the tide went out and left flotsam. The old ways are gone.

I got polio when I was 13. Spent many weeks in a hospital in Brighton MA. That left the left side of me weak. Two years later, I had the chance to board a horse named Lady. The Phelan family of Middle Pond owned the horse they couldn't catch. She kept following me around, so along about August they said keep her for the winter. I rode her and I felt better. I had her for three winters. Caring for and riding Lady every day helped me recover from polio effects.

I took over the everyday farm chores from my father for a couple of years. He had to get a regular job to make ends meet. Eventually the cows got mastitis, and that was the end of the cows. It just wasn't feasible to keep the Farm going.

I did 2 years of High School in the old building on High School Road and the next 2 years in the new school on West Main Street. I took auto mechanics there and got 2 diplomas, one from the Trade School, the other from the 'regular' school. But I took a job as a carpenter, which was my wife's family occupation. I got married at 20 to Sandra Sarkinen from Hyannis, of Finnish background. We had three kids: Lisa who lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, married, but no children; runs a fused glass business. Chris who is a builder in Vail, Colorado and has 2 beautiful daughters and my youngest Adam who now lives in Hyannis.

I started a woodworking business in my garage. I had a woodshop at 102 Lovell's Lane, and built three houses, one after another as you drive up Lovell's Lane from Route 149. Then I, after the economy went south in the late '80s I worked briefly at Rogers and Marney. We got divorced after 35 years, and I moved to Middleboro, with 3 horses, 3 trucks, and 2 trailers and lots of woodworking equipment. I had a wonderful partner Suzanne Daurie who died on January 17, 2018.

My leisure time has been spent trail riding in Miles Standish State Park—it is beautiful; it used to be a game farm, lots of woods, and history. The woods in MSSF are all new growth do to fires. I tell people I'm older that most of the trees is Myles Standish! There's no first growth, for the Northeast was clear-cut three times for timber.

The tarpits, which you can see in Miles Standish State Forest are large circles with Schawlow vent holes and have dark soils, were laid in a large 60-foot diameter circle, with five pits on the circle. The first step in each pit was to lay down some old sail cloth and wet it, then pile pitch pine and white pine on it. They'd start a fire and cover the whole thing with another sailcloth, leaving it to smolder for days. Turpentine came out into the sailcloth-lined pits, floating on the top, and the tar on the bottom. Charcoal was also made in the pit and was for the local steel industry when in earlier times they made steel from bog iron; the industry moved to

Pennsylvania when coal was discovered there. Two big industries on Cape Cod were making salt and the charcoal industry was widespread.

At the Bicentennial, when I was 33, I rode a horse from Barnstable Village to the State House in Boston, re-enacting the delivery of the scroll which had been signed by some Barnstable boys saying that they would volunteer to fight for independence. I carried the scroll wearing a three-cornered hat and a colonial shirt and vest. The ride took 18 hours over three days. I used the same horse, but the original ride used 3 horses. My route followed power lines and gas lines, and went through Miles Standish Park and along the railroad lines, ending up at the State House to deliver the scroll to Governor Sargent but he was fishing on the Cape.

I once got sued as a horse thief. We were out in Colorado visiting a woman who raised mastiffs. We bred mastiffs too, and often recommended her when we didn't have puppies. As thanks he gave me a colt. I remember it was July 2 and it was 99° in Arizona, the next day in Colorado it was snowing! A few months after we got home 4 State Police officers crept up to the house, and a woman officer came up with a summons for horse theft. It turned out that the woman had sold my colt before she gave it to me. We were in court five times, lost the horse and never did that again.

Riding horses is what I do for recreation. Part of that is trail maintenance, which is ongoing and necessary.

