

ALONGSHORE.

BY JOHN BELL



Project planner James F. Meads, of the Cape & Vineyard Electric Co. revived history the other day when he suggested that the town might name the new road to be built along the former railroad bed "Old Colony Road" instead of "Harry Kemp Way."

Not that the late "poet of the dunes" shouldn't be honored. "We ought to save his name," said Jim, "for a more appropriate use."

He didn't say what, and he wasn't looking for an argument. He was simply reminding me that Harry's route to the dunes was built by the Old Colony Railroad, long before the New York, New Haven & Hartford took it over.

And that the narrow, level road had employed hundreds of Provincetown fishermen, working with shovels (no machines in 1872), to supplement their winter income.

They had had a disastrous fishing season, "brought about by the low prices of fish, poor catches, etc. They hoped to make up in part for their losses by working on the railroad," wrote Advocate editor John M. Crocker.

A MODERN PARALLEL

They didn't make out too well. The winter of 1872-73, in particular, was as hard as our present one. One February snowstorm was so severe that Samuel Knowles' stagecoach brought no mail from Wellfleet for

days -- the train from Boston hadn't been able to get through snowdrifts to the end of the line.

In that same storm, a house on Mechanic Street, behind the original "Provincetown Bank", burned to the ground because firemen couldn't pull their pumpers through clogged streets.

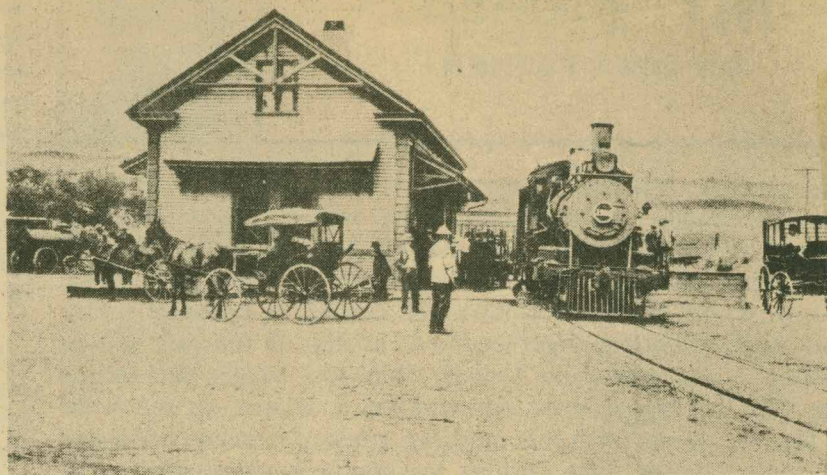
On top of weather difficulties, an Old Colony subcontractor named Farrell skipped town with his men's payroll. He was arrested on the up-Cape train from Wellfleet, but not all the money was recovered. The fishermen had to settle for 80% of their pay and 100% of the Advocate's sympathy.

"Thus to be defrauded," wrote Dr. Crocker, "seems the crowning work of misfortune."

A big celebration was to be organized for the day when the first train came to Provincetown. The date (July 22, 1873) had been known for months. It wasn't until the last week in June, however, that the various committees began to pull together. Dr. Crocker was in charge of Finances.

Considering that they had only three weeks to prepare (in contrast to the months our 350th Anniversary Committee has been struggling), the committees did pretty well.

The whole town was decked in bunting. A 1000-seat pavilion next to Town Hall (on what is now called



SAM KNOWLES' stagecoach still met incoming trains in 1900.

Monument Hill) had been erected, and the Dearborn brothers and Frank P. Smith (later host at the Atlantic House) had catered a banquet for nearly 800 people in the big tent. Three governors, five mayors and a senator made speeches.

POLITICKING, 1873

Every speech contained some politicking, in that presidential election year. None was more clever than that by General Benjamin F. Butler, who was running for Governor of Massachusetts.

He faced an audience of fishermen who, in turn, faced almost certain hardship. Congress had lifted tariffs on imported fish. Provincetown fishermen already suffered from low prices; now they would have to compete with even cheaper Canadian fish imports. Butler had opposed the bill without success.

So he flattered them instead. "Much of our success in the war of 1812," he said, "was due to the hardy fishermen of Cape Cod..." He praised their part in the Civil War. Then, turning to the assembled dignitaries, he said, "When you go back, tell your friends that you saw well built houses, thrifty gardens and, more than that, the noble men and women I see now before me."

It sounded good, but Butler didn't make Governor of Massachusetts until nine years later.

PROFIT AND LOSS

The coming of the Old Colony Railroad did, in fact, prove a benefit to Provincetown fishermen. It let them ship their fish fresh instead of

salting and drying them, or sailing over to Boston with them. The celebration itself, however, went into the red.

Committeemen met in the great pavilion the next morning to "feast on banquet leftovers and discuss how to raise a deficit of several hundred dollars."

It would seem, according to Dr. Crocker's story, that they had some liquid consolation up there in spite of Provincetown's no-liquor laws. "Long live the memory of the one," he wrote, "who proposed elevenses for himself and the others who happened around."

CAUSTIC COMMENT

The editor had been a constant rooster for extending the railroad down from Orleans. He used his Advocate to encourage, scold, and make fun of bureaucratic delay. At one point he reported:

"If the railroad financial arrangements are amicably settled with the directors, we will survive. If there is the usual hitch which will result in further postponement, we shall be ready to kick the bucket or somebody else."

Two weeks after the first train had arrived, crammed with people coming to the celebration, Dr. Crocker realized he had helped introduce a new traffic hazard. It was like him to treat it sarcastically:

"And still we don't realize that we have a railroad, but some parents will if they do not keep their children

from the track. They seem to think it is perfectly safe to lounge on the rails just as a train is coming in. Two or three coroner's inquests will correct this."