

Marstons Mills Historical Society  
Interview with Vivian Cushing  
(by James Gould & David Martin)  
July, 2015



P.O. Box 1375 Marstons Mills, MA 02648  
marstonsmillshistorical.org

Marstons Mills resident Vivian Emma Cushing was born in Middleboro MA 12 Jan. 1925.

Her father, Leon Francis Melix, was born in Middleboro, MA 30 June 1898 and died 28 May 1978. After her father completed the 8th grade in June 1914, the family moved to Montana, where they homesteaded, living at first in a grass sod hut. When they went back to Middleboro in 1918, Leon hitchhiked across the country, working on a Mississippi River steamboat, travelling with a circus, and joining up briefly with a Black man who played the piano while Leon sang. He also rode the rails and did a lot of walking. He finally reached New York City, where he had enough money in his pocket to buy a ticket on a boat of the Old Fall River Line, taking him to Fall River, from which he hitchhiked to Middleboro, only to find that his family was away on Cape Cod, picking cranberries.

Her paternal grandfather William Warren Melix was born in Plymouth, MA, son of a man whom Chief Red Shell declared a descendant of the famous Massasoit through Massasoit's daughter Amie. William's mother was a Harlow, descended from the family that came on the second ship to Plymouth. He married Emma (the source of Vivian's middle name) Ida Schaufle, from a German family in Philadelphia. She had a lovely singing voice, and joined one of Wild Bill Cody's Wild West shows, darkening her complexion to look like an Indian maiden who stood on stage while John Paul, a Micmac Indian from New Brunswick, Canada shot a coin out of her hand, or an apple on her head. She eventually married Paul and had two children. After Paul's death she remarried to William Melix, and they had 5 more children, one of whom was Vivian's father, the eldest.

Vivian's mother was Helen Stets, born 6 Nov. 1900, daughter of Frank Emil Stets, from Glauchau, Saxony (between Leipzig and Dresden). He came to the US about 1882 and worked in the Malden Rubber Boot Co. He married in 1885 Bernadine Christiana Liebsch, from Bad Elgersburg, Thuringia, Germany, who had come to join her sister Henrietta. Her parents came to Middleboro in 1900 from Malden, where her father had a farm about 3 miles from town.

Leon and Helen first met in the Fall of 1918 soon after he had returned from Montana, but they did not start keeping company until about 1922. They were married in Brockton in September 1923, and Vivian was born in Middleboro 12 Jan. 1925. Her sister, Fay Elizabeth, who now lives in Vermont, was born in 1924, and her brother Donald was born 30 Apr. 1928 (he died in Marstons Mills in 2014). One of Vivian's earliest memories is going to the Middleboro Town Hall to get her vaccination against smallpox.

Vivian's father worked for the West Bridgewater Brick Company. A neighbor in Middleboro left there for Sandwich and spoke so highly of Sandwich that Vivian's father came there, too. They moved to Sandwich on Columbus Day, 12 October 1929 (just 3 weeks before the Wall Street

Crash). He became a lobsterman in Cape Cod Bay for 40 years. He arose every day at 4 am to get lobsters and crabs, working from a 12-foot boat equipped with a gasoline motor, first an inboard, then an outboard. He made all of his own equipment, including wooden traps made from scrap lumber, knitting "the heads", and singing away while he worked.

The family lived in a rented house on Factory Street, looking out over the marsh, and across the street from an old building of the Sandwich Glass Company. The house had no running water, no bathroom, and no electricity. Vivian was the oldest child of 9 in the family; the youngest sister was born in 1941. With nine kids, it was three girls in a bed. The railroad ran behind their house, and the children (including Vivian) ran out to watch the trains go by, until the novelty wore off. They learned to swim there in a creek, where they cut their toes on shards of glass.

Vivan has numerous memories about old Sandwich. She attended the brand new Henry T. Wing School in Sandwich, beginning in September 1929, walking the mile over to it and then and home, rain or snow. Her favorite teacher was her second-grade teacher, Miss Martha Newcomb, who had gone to school with Thornton Burgess in Sandwich. This homely woman whom they called "Tiger Lil" in her girlhood introduced Vivian to her lifelong love of reading, taking her by the hand to the Sandwich Library to show her the small shelf of books for her age and getting her a library card.

The family went to the Federated Church in Sandwich, a combination of three earlier churches—Methodist, Congregational, and Unitarian. Youth Fellowship was the social center in her teen years. She also taught Sunday School and sang in the Senior Choir.

For other activities, Campfire Girls was fun. She played the piano, and violin in three orchestras and played on the girls' basketball team for 4 years. She was on the honor roll most of the time in school. She graduated from Sandwich High school in June 1942.

The Melix family by September 1941 had grown to nine children, and their parents were hard put to bring up this family during the Depression years. It took a lot of hard work and doing without anything which looked like a luxury—except for eating lobster! They ate a lot of fish, fish chowder, quahaug and clam chowder, corn chowder, pea soup, and potato "bargain". During the summer of 1942 and on weekends following, Vivian worked at Pratt's Drug Store and saved her money.

Vivian then went to the Hyannis Secretarial School in September, 1942; she had been awarded a \$100 scholarship, which covered four months of the \$25 monthly tuition. Although the course was usually 2 years, she was ready for a job in a year. She went to work for the Cape and Vineyard Electric Company accounting department at a pay rate of \$18 a week, out of which she paid her mother \$10 per week. Her pay got to be \$35 when she left 5 years later. The office was in the Pilgrim Building on Main St. opposite the Hyannis Post Office. She got there from home by rides from friends, or by train or bus if people worked late at times.

World War II was a big part of her life. Her brother Don enlisted, but with 9 kids, her father was exempt. She became a Junior Service Volunteer, organized by the Sandwich Women's Club. The Club organized dances with those servicemen from Camp Edwards and Coast Guardsmen from the Cape Cod Canal in Sandwich, to which they rode by bus.

"This was a bittersweet time", Vivian said, with GIs going off to war, some who were killed, and others who never came home. She wrote letters to many of the servicemen—"I've always been a letter writer". During the last two years of the war there was a USO in Sandwich, and "my mother would invite the GIs over to the house; they'd be sitting at the kitchen table eating cookies." And then there was rationing—gas, sugar, etc.

Her best friend was dating Buddy Lapham of Marstons Mills (more about Buddy Lapham later in this interview). He set up a blind date for Vivian with Wilbur Cushing. When Buddy got to Wilbur's house on River Road, they found him lying on the couch, reading the paper. That was 21 September 1946 when they first met. Wilbur did not readily appeal to Vivian at first. He was very quiet and didn't really know how to dance. But they continued to date. He was a hard worker—tall, slim, and blond with sparkling blue eyes, and she liked his family. "I guess he just grew on me", she said. After four months, they were engaged and were married on 21 September 1947, just a year after their first date. The wedding was at the Federated Church of Sandwich. Wilbur had just started building the house on Cedar Tree Neck Road, Marstons Mills, where she still lives. So he took his new bride there to live in the new house.

Their first child was a girl, Virginia Lee (Ginny), who was born 17 October 1949 at Cape Cod Hospital in Hyannis. Their son, Frederic Curtis (Rick), was born there on 6 February 1953.

Wilbur worked for his stepfather, A. G. Griffin, in the masonry trade. He loved being on the water, fishing, clamming, quahauging, oystering, and scalloping. Her also liked spearing eels through the ice in winter, although Vivian did not like frying them.

Ginny entered the first grade in 1955. Vivian joined the Go Getters' Club, which was a group of mothers of Marstons Mills Elementary School children. Some of the other members were Marian Macomber, Betty Childs, Betty Ranta, Alice Elskamp, Frances Hinckley, and Dorothy Moore (Superintendent of Schools); they met monthly at the Marstons Mills schoolhouse. The Club raised money for books for the school, a TV set, and basketball equipment.

A.G. Griffin, Wilbur's stepfather, was a pleasant man, decent—he had no use for drinking—and a dry sense of humor. He was from Chelmsford, MA and put himself thru [U. Mass.] Amherst with an agricultural degree. He began landscaping on Cape Cod in the 1930's, and lived in the house on Prince's Cove. He and his first wife were divorced, and he then met Wilbur's mother, probably when she was working at the village store. They married in 1931, and had one child, Betty Lee, who has always been a wonderful sister-in-law. A.G. became "the only father Wilbur ever knew." They moved to the house on Prince's Cove. Before going to school every day, Wilbur would check the trapline in the marsh which he had set to catch animals like muskrats for their skins, which were sold to Sears. He'd have to go home and change before he went to school. In his high school years Wilbur shellfished in the summer in order to put a few pennies in his pocket. He also helped A.G. with gardening and small masonry projects.

A.G. Griffin got into the masonry business since the building trade was going well after the war. He was a go-getter, a real workaholic, sexton of Liberty Hall, scoutmaster, and took care of widows. He was very good at helping people, and lent to those in need. Vivian managed the payroll for him. A. G. Griffin built a two-story building in 1947 as a masonry supply shop for his business on the ground floor on Route 149, with four small apartments on the second floor.

Wilbur helped to lay the bricks for the building. A.G. developed the land on Hilltop Drive. When he bought the Benson house, it came with two woodlots in a remote part east of Lovell's Pond. Since no one knew where they were, he gave them to Wilbur, saying "You can have them if you can find them." Wilbur did find them and eventually sold them to the water company. A.G. built several houses at the Cove, which he rented out. He later purchased the former Robinson Weeks House (more about Robinson Weeks later), and the Revilo Benson homestead, both in the village center. He developed the land on Hilltop Drive, which came with the Benson House. It also came with two woodlots.

#### Information on historic Mills individuals

Vivian Cushing's words:

"Ten days after I got married to Wilbur, I got involved with Marstons Mills church. Marjorie Hamblin, the organist and choir director, and Lena Jones Childs came over and got me to join the choir. Lena and I sang alto together. We had an electric organ which was bought from money given by Emma Jones. When Marjorie quit, I played the organ for a year and a half. Then we found Jeannie Van Leeuwen to play, then Elsie Gifford, and a young man Garth Grew who worked for Sherman florists in Osterville.

We put on musical shows at Liberty Hall, and I sang.

"Buddy (George) Lapham introduced me to Wilbur. He was a very colorful character, a carpenter who worked for Arthur Williams. He married Helen Grace Pierce, and bought the Weeks house.

"Dana Lapham came home from the service and learned to fly at the Marstons Mills airport—I went up with him once. He married Priscilla Hinckley of Osterville. He rejoined the Army and went to northern Alaska with an oil company.

"When I came to Marstons Mills, the minister was Peter Palches of a Lithuanian family. His wife Lois wrote poetry. The next minister was McKenna White. This was when we found Henry Hamblin's history of the church. I copied it and gave the original copy to the dance studio owner who took over the church building, but never got it back. The original is in the Methodist church in Osterville, and I have the carbon copy which I'll give to the Historical Society. Then we had a series of students from Boston University's Divinity School. Then we had John Carter, a retired minister in Hyannis, who was born in England and served in WWII submarines. His wife was named Lily.

"The last minister was Kenneth Stiegler. In June 1968 we merged with Osterville [and the church closed]. Many of the members didn't move because they were attached to the village. When Phil Sherman reopened the Marstons Mills church, it was non-denominational. Buddy [Lapham] came back, as did Lena [Childs]. But I stayed; I loved the choir.

"Mo Hinckley was the son of Maurice Hinckley, both cops. The father married a Pierce girl; Mo married Frances Lapham. Teddy Pierce was taken in as a boy by Mrs. Higgins. He lived on Block Island for a while; I don't know why.

"Nora Pierce Gifford was well-known in the village as "Gramma". An ardent Methodist, she was a fine actress in our village plays, always perfect with her lines. Gideon Lovell I didn't know, but the story is that he always walked to Osterville, and when offered a ride would reply, "I'm in a hurry!"

"Robinson "Robbie" Weeks, whom Wilbur called "Count De Kakiak", was another figure. His father went to Wisconsin as a minister, but his wife divorced him and came back to Marstons Mills with their son. He's the barefooted boy in the school photo. ("Kinda' odd"). He had travelled in Europe and made a stamp collection that was left in the Weeks house when the Laphams moved in; I still have it.

"Junior Jones fell out of a wagon when he was a kid, and got his foot caught in the wheel. He didn't limp, but didn't serve in the war. He was active in the church, ran the store, and was one of the youngest postmasters, age 21. He ran the post office out of the back of the store, and later built the post office building that is now Craig Larson's office. He took as a partner Frank McCluskey whose wife Janet was Junior's wife Dell's cousin. Frank ran the store, and Junior ran the post office. Junior's mother was Ada Hallett Fuller Jones, active in the church. Her husband Loring, the storekeeper, was a big man with a round face.

"Priscilla Higgins, daughter of the doctor, never married. She was a nice lady who worked in the town office.

"Forest Hamblin married the church organist, Marjorie Warner Hamblin. They had two daughters; the elder one, Phyllis, was shot and killed by a boy whom she was baby-sitting. Forest loved the water, and had a big oyster shack out on the point, where they moved during the summer when they rented out the main house. He got a lot of scallops which he knew how to find, but never told where they were. They'd dump the scallops in the basement where we'd shuck them. I never got good at shucking oysters or quahogs, but you didn't know I was a scallop shucker!

"Forest's brother, Leonard Hamblin, was a carpenter who helped restore the grist mill. Marstons Mills has changed a lot since I first came. The people were country hicks whom the outsiders called "Millbillies". How different today!"



This interview transcript is to be used exclusively for individual research purposes, and may not be reproduced or published without express written permission from the Marstons Mills Historical Society.