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Windham in the 60s: Back to school at Field-Allen

by Max Millard

From 1958 to 1988 my parents and their six children occupied the Goold House on Windham Center Road in Windham, Maine.



Goold House

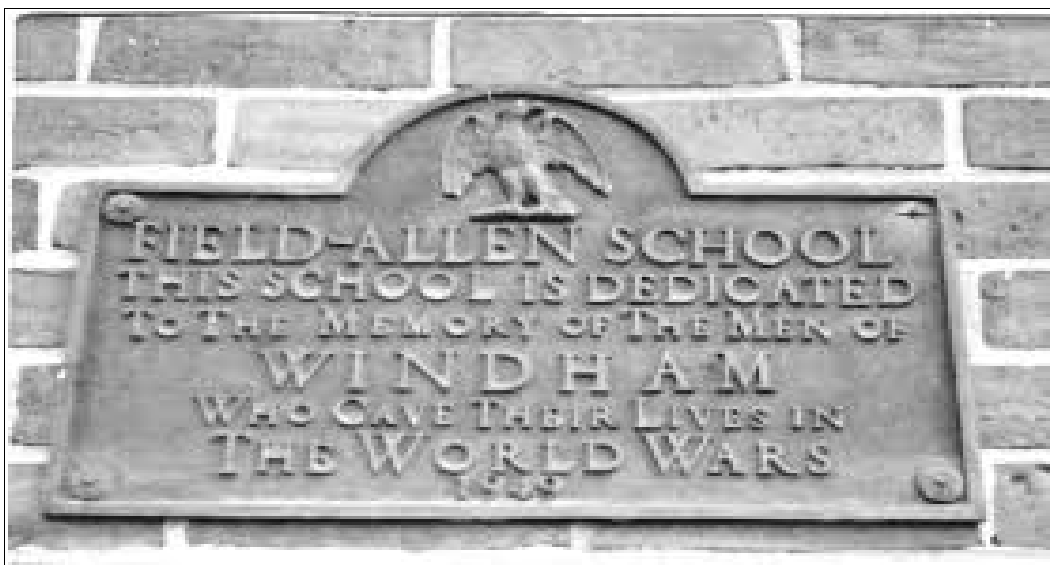
Out of those years, perhaps the most memorable for me were 1961 to 1963, when I attended Field-Allen Junior High.



Field-Allen Junior High

My classmates and I had spent the previous year at Newhall School, an aging barn-shaped structure in South Windham with three classrooms of 30 students each. Windham then had a population of about 4,600, and Newhall was sufficient for all the town's sixth graders.

Field-Allen was named after Charles Field, the first soldier in Windham killed in World War I, and James Allen, a Windham resident who died on Iwo Jima in World War II.



This was the first year that my class had separate teachers for different subjects. It was also the first time I could walk to school, rather than catching the bus. The little store atop Windham Center was the IGA, later to become the Windham Center Grocery and then Corsetti's. Across the street was the tiny Windham Center Circulating Library, where the fine for overdue books was 2 cents a day.



IGA and library, circa 1950s

The IGA was a very popular after-school hangout for both junior high and senior high school students, mostly males. They rushed in like a swarm of locusts, eager to consume Devil Dogs, Drake's pretzels, and as much soda as they could swallow before being held to account.

No one waited patiently in line to pay for their purchases, but

grabbed whatever they could and paid afterward. The store owner eyed the crowd warily, but it was a losing effort. My buddy Steve Quimby was a master at gulping down two bottle of Pepsi so quickly that he had to pay for just one.

Outside the store, the boys displayed their skills in cigarette smoking. Some competed to see how long they could keep a smouldering butt alive without burning their fingers. Others blew a cascade of smoke rings, or artfully released the smoke upward from their mouth and re-inhaled it through their nose The oral gymnasts would curl the end of their tongue around a very short, still-burning cigarette and somehow maneuver inside their closed mouth, then puff out the smoke.

The big event of the fall was the Cumberland Fair, which had the slogan "Always in September." Everyone went. As soon as you entered, you were assaulted by a chorus of "quada quada quada." That's because everything, from the rides to the girly show, cost 25 cents.



There was a hoop-throwing game, run by a man who echoed, “Prize every time!” The prizes were attached to wooden blocks of different sizes. Most of them were cheap junk, but there was also a \$10 bill that almost no one could win because the hoop barely fit over the block. I heard that in case someone did manage it, the man would quickly remove the hoop and place it over a cheap prize. Most of the players were kids, so he could get away with it.

Another huckster was a man who called himself the guesser. He would guess your age, your weight, and for those of driving age, the type of car you drove. His routine was to say, “You drive a Ford, don't you?” If the person said no, that it was a Chevy, he'd open his hand and show a note that read Chevy. He'd smile smugly and announce, “That was my real guess.”

Then there was the spook house, a large trailer equipped with false passageways and buzzers, and lined with foam rubber. It was completely dark inside. Kids would emerge with foam rubber bulging under their shirts. Others, as hinted by the odor, would use it to relieve themselves.

Field-Allen served lunch in the cafeteria each day, featuring such delicacies as creamed chipped beef, a staple of the U.S. Army, which the kids dubbed “sh** on shingles.”



Another offering was bubble and squeak, a mixture of unidentifiable flesh, mushy vegetables, and a pungent broth. By the time it was served, it was no longer bubbling, and though I never heard it squeak, I suspected that some of its components once did.



bubble and squeak

The meal usually included a dry, crumbly biscuit, which few people ate unless there was a tasty gravy for dipping. But the biscuits were a welcome addition because they always came with a pat of butter – never margarine, even if the rest of the meal was undigestable. It could be used for playing with your food after a meal, adding a touch of greasy yellow to a potpourri of mashed-up peas, milk, and peach syrup.

Best of all, it could be placed on the end of a fork handle and launched into space. If perfectly aimed, it would stick to the ceiling. Some boys got so good that they could design a face by shooting up separate pats for the eyes, nose and mouth. Further entertainment was provided by the frequent unsticking of the butter. Especially on hot days, the stuff would melt and release its grip on the ceiling, sometimes plopping down in kids' lunches, to their great disgust.

My four sisters all graduated from Windham High, but I did not. For 9th grade I was sent away to the all-boys North Yarmouth Academy, which was no upgrade.

But the five and a half years that I spent in the Windham public schools far exceeded any other school or college I attended, and I have always consider the Windham class of '67 as my only real classmates. I'm still in touch with some of them today, and we talk nostalgically about those distat days when life was so uncomplicated.

