



# Farmhouse's future

## Donation leaves a legacy honoring the Wilcox-Bushley family

by **Natalie K. Pollock**  
Staff Writer

**M**ary Bushley has lived in her family's homestead on Copper Mine Road in Farmington since she was born 89 years ago. Her father William Bushley was known for his apples and her mother Flora Wilcox Bushley for the many talents it took to keep a farming family thriving. In 1995, she and her sister Ruth Bushley Childs donated 24 acres of the original estate to the Farmington Land Trust as an open preserve; at the end of last year, they entrusted the organization with the remaining parcel that surrounds their home.

Bushley never married, but her sister did, moving away to start a new life as a schoolteacher. Childs wrote a collection of memoirs about growing up in Farmington. Bushley wrote poetry.

The land and the house, which came to their parents through their mother's family, have a special meaning for them both. The last few years, the fate of their cherished home had been bothering the sisters. Since 1985, it was listed on a historic survey conducted by the Connecticut Historical Commission. The research stated, "This house was probably built by Isaiah Rowe [an early settler]; he received title in 1804 and may have built the house soon after that."

In the mid 19th century, a land map attributes the house to Rowe's son Col. William G. Rowe. In 1858, the property was purchased by Samuel S. Miller, who sold it to Adrian Moses of Burlington, who sold it to Jerry and Flora Wilcox of North Canton in 1869 – the sisters' great-grandparents.

Their great-grandfather "was said to have run one of the most successful farms in the area and was known for his apples," according to the Connecticut Historical Commission's description.

In 1969, Wilcox's granddaughter, Flora Elizabeth Wilcox Bushley, 75 years old at the time, wrote about her grandparents: "As they had occasion to drive past the farm in Farmington several times, they were pleased with the many cherry trees, four apple orchards besides pear and plum trees, so they decided to purchase it."

Flora Elizabeth was Mary and Ruth Bushley's mother.

The property consists of the main house, which has been altered and added onto over the years, a barn and outbuildings to the south, and a circular driveway.

According to Tina Delaney, executive director of the Farmington Land Trust and a neighbor and friend to Mary Bushley,

"The family was originally from England and related to Noah Webster, most Connecticut governors, and abolitionist John Brown."

Delaney stops in regularly to help Bushley with errands and to listen to her stories. They often pour over old photographs of the family's life. Bushley takes great pride in her sister's bound memoir, "RFD West District" and lends out copies. Within its 50 pages, Childs reflects on their lives on the 100-acre dairy farm from 1924 to 1947, and then on her own experiences as a schoolteacher in Broad Brook for 35 years, retiring in 1982. The sisters keep in touch through hand-written letters.

In one story, Childs remembers studying homemaking, cooking and sewing in junior high school. She preferred sewing. She wrote, "My sister went on to become much more proficient than I. We would spend hours studying pattern books and haunting fabric stores where we envisioned beautiful, stylish additions to our wardrobes."

Bushley and her sister attended Union School and would sometimes get a ride on their tractor when the school bus broke down.

"Ruth was queen of May Day [at school] one year. I wasn't jealous. She is 11 months older. Mom held her back and put us in the same class. It was a mistake I think," Bushley said.

She recalled that the family did not have a telephone when she was young. "One day we had a fire in the chimney, so I ran next door and asked

them to call the fire department. I was a young teen but I did not know how to use a phone," she said.

She remembers that they had 12 cows when she was growing up, and their milk was sold to Seibert Dairy in New Britain, which became the Guida Seibert Dairy Company in 1947. It was the girls' job to round up the cows. She also recalls planting corn with her dad. He would dig the holes and she would drop in the seeds, six kernels to a hole.

"Father did the farming here. It is his hard work that kept the farm, although it was in mother's name. She died in 1973. Six years later he went to a convalescent home and was there for 11 years," Bushley said.

Although she never left home, Bushley worked for the Phoenix Life Insurance Company and took the bus from Unionville to Hartford every day. She retired in August 1990 when she turned 65. Her father died the following month. When he retired, her father sold part of the land to the town for two schools, including West District, and was paid in installments.

"One day Mary was worried about the house. She did not want it to be sold to a developer and to see a McMansion there. They could have been millionaires if they had sold the land and it was developed," Delaney said. The first 24 acres donated in 1995 became the West District Nature Preserve. It is an open area rich in plants and animal habitats. When the taxes on the house and the remaining 24 acres reached \$8,000, the sisters decided to also donate that to the land trust.

"I did not think of selling it. I don't care about the money. I don't need anything. We donated the 24 acres first. We walked the boundaries and figured out what was left with the house for me. It's about one acre. I have lived here my entire life," Bushley said. The house and surrounding land is what remains of the original 275-acre farm.

Under the terms of their agreement, Bushley will continue living in the 10-room farmhouse, and the land trust will study what will be required to renovate it for use as its headquarters and a visitor's center. In the meantime, several members have been keeping a watchful eye on the building and helping with maintenance projects.

"This is an incredible gift. We want to repay her while she is still alive and enjoy her stories and maintain a relationship with her," Delaney said. Bushley and her sister are the last members of their family.

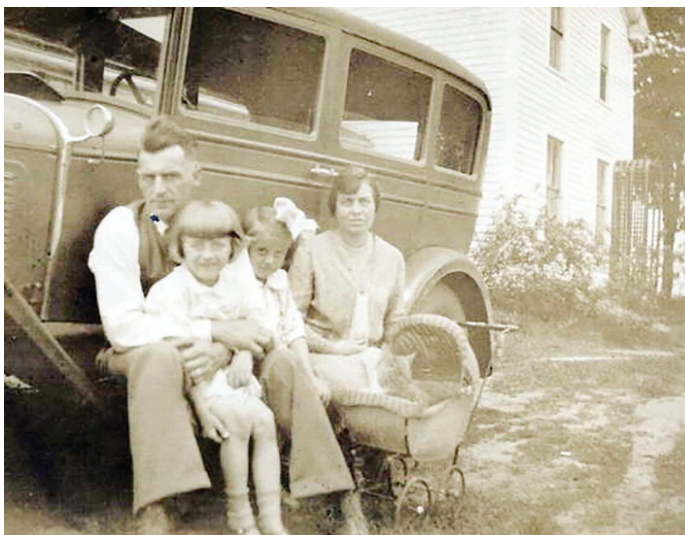
There were several other farms clustered together in the West District section of Unionville, and she has seen most of the owners sell off their properties for development because the families could no longer afford to keep them up.

"This is a historical house to the neighborhood. The house next door used to be a tavern," Bushley said.

In her long life she has visited many major cities and state capitals, mostly by bus, and has traveled as far as Hawaii and Mexico. One of her fondest memories is seeing the Tall Ships in Boston Harbor. But Bushley has never wanted to leave her family home for long.

"We are extremely grateful for the generosity and vision of the Bushley sisters, who have helped the Farmington Land Trust secure a permanent place in town.

"They gave us the house with the land, and we gave Mary a lease and invited her to live there as long as she likes. We want to preserve the character of the house and be respectful of it," said Doug Pelham, land trust president. **VL**



Above: Mary Bushley meets with Tina Delaney of the Farmington Land Trust.

Left: In a historic photo, William, Mary, Ruth and Flora Wilcox Bushley sit in front of the home that Mary and Ruth recently donated to the Farmington Land Trust for eventual use as the organization's headquarters.



Mary and Ruth with their mother, Flora (center) in front of their home.

Photo by Natalie K. Pollock

Photos Courtesy of the Farmington Land Trust

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