

Kelley's Corner: Memories, some tragic, give it a life of its own

By David Singer

ACTON — Everybody seems to know where Kelley's Corner is — at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue (Route 111) and Main Street (Route 27).

And most seem to know how the corner got its name — from the first of two Kelley's that owned at least one corner of the intersection.

But the corner's rich history, some of it tragic, seems to remain fuzzy in some residents' memories.

"Some place to go through to get somewhere else," was how Haywood Houghton described it in a project by his fifth grade class in 1981 called "Under the Cover of Kelley's Corner."

While some may see the intersection as just that, it has meant more to others than just a place to get through.

"It's an area that you can usually depend on," said Houghton's classmate Erika Kneeland during the project.

While you can usually depend on some shopping and traffic congestion, you can also depend on the corner to stir up some memories, and not all good.

Virginia Gates recalls three deaths at the Kelley house, which is the house now occupied by the attorneys D'Agostine and Levine, on the north-

west corner of the intersection.

In 1946, Gates recalls Alfred Gilbert accidentally driving over one of the infants on the driveway. According to Acton's Town Report for that year, Kathleen Gilbert died at the age of one year, nine months and 24 days.

Gates also recalls a murder-suicide, or a double-suicide, as others remember it in the Kelley house. According to Gates, Alfred Gilbert shot his wife Mary Kelley Gilbert, and then shot himself.

"I remember that when the father went upstairs to shoot himself, the children stayed behind the stove all day until the uncle came home that night," said Gates.

Acton police Lt. John McNiff said he was pretty sure it happened in 1948. He remembered the murder-suicide as the first case former Police Chief Edward Collins Jr. handled when he came on the job.

The Town Clerk's office said they have Gilbert's death on file for 1951, but no record of Mary (Kelley) Gilbert's death.

According to Acton's Town Report, Alfred Grover Gilbert Jr. and Mary Frances Kelley Gilbert died on June 13, 1951.

According to an 1890 map by Horace Tuttle, Simon Hosmer built the Kelley house in 1760.

Reuben Reed bought the house before John Kelley bought it.

According to the report of Peter Richard's 1981 fifth grade class at the McCarthy-Towne School, John Kelley bought it in 1877. It burned down and was rebuilt sometime around 1905. William Kelley, the town's postmaster and Mary Kelley's brother, inherited it in 1922 with his wife Julia. Gilbert and Mary Kelley lived in it until their deaths, and William Kelley took it over again. The Ski Barn then occupied it from 1954 until 1972, when D'Agostine and Levine moved in.

In 1883, William Kelley, 20, attended the first session of Acton High School and was one of the five who was graded with the score of 100.

A group of subdivision roads located on Main Street south of the corner, are all named after various Kelley's: Francine Road, Beverly Road, Nadine Road, Doris Road, and Kelley Road.

"Since I remember, it was always called Kelley's Corner," said Carl Simeone, remembering back to the thirties.

"For as long as I can remember it was Kelley's Corner," Gates said. Gates recalled that before a bridge was built over Route 2, the corner was real quiet. "I remember saying to



The Kelley's house, where several tragedies occurred, sits on the northwest corner of Route 111 and Route 27.

(Staff photo by Ann Ringwood)

myself, 'I hope my car doesn't break down here.'"

And just how far back does Kelley's Corner go? Article 25 of the 1898 Town Warrant read: "To see if the town will locate and build a building for the high school near Kelly's Corner." Interestingly enough, Kel-

ters of Prospect Street.

Virginia Milberry also remembered it as a bare intersection.

There was a restaurant called the Actonian on the southwest corner of the intersection, where the New England Telephone building is today. There was also a house next to it, which was moved to 230 Main Street over 25 years ago.

The other corners soon became occupied. There was a fruit stand at one time. There was a Sunoco station that became a sweater shop that Gates said also sold fish when sweater sales were low. The wife of one of the owners still maintains the yarn business on Route 2, called Brett Yarns.

Another Kelly came along in the 1930s, one without the 'e' — Kelly. This is the Kelly of Kelly's Korner Kitchen and the Acton Bowladrome of Main Street.

Perhaps the growth of Kelley's Corner can be seen as a microcosm of Acton.

What is still remembered by Virginia Gates as a quiet, desolate intersection, is now a busy corner that sports no less than 1,155 signs, which Richard's fifth graders counted.

ley was spelled without the 'e' in the article.

The intersection goes as far back as 1830, when Massachusetts Avenue was built. Main Street (Route 27) was built in 1735.

"We used to sled through that intersection," said the Davis sis-

Became July 21, 1988

86.70

June 13 *1951