

Famous Clarendon Cannon Will Soon Be Blasting Japs

"I Wish I Could Throw It Straight at Some Japs Myself!" Says 82-Year-Old Town Clerk; Weapon Fired on 4th of July for 35 Years.

The famous Clarendon cannon, which boomed out Fourth of July celebrations for several generations and which blasted its echo through the hills on Armistice Day, 1918 for the last time, was scrapped for junk yesterday to aid the war effort.

"I wish I could throw it straight at some Japs or Germans myself!" Mrs. Mary A. Davis, 82-year-old North Clarendon town clerk exclaimed yesterday when she finally decided to part with the cherished cannon to aid the scrap iron salvage campaign.

Old residents of the Clarendon area vividly recall the booming noise of the cannon as it was fired incessantly for 24 hours every Fourth of July from about the year 1880 to 1918. Its noise had such a distinctive thunder it could be heard for miles up and down the Otter valley. There is even a record that a Clarendon man heard the cannon clearly across the mountains one Fourth of July as he stood on the Ludlow railroad station.

Although it had a report like a true "big gun" of the Army, the famous Clarendon cannon never saw a battlefield and never fired a round in any war. The cannon was an entirely peaceable weapon, made for celebration purposes by the late Allan B. Arnold of North Clarendon.

Arnold was given a discarded steel journal or axel to a freight car by the Rutland railroad early in the 1880's. A competent machinist, Arnold drilled a hole partly through the iron shaft and mounted it on a small wooden truck he built.

The cannon was then ready for its first trials. The home-made weapon was stuffed to the muzzle with blasting powder, a fuse was thrust through a small hole drilled near the end, and a match applied. After a preliminary sizzle, during which time the small group of spectators raced for cover, the cannon went off with a report that seemed to shake the surrounding mountains.

For the next 35 years the cannon was carefully hauled to a small hill southwest of the town clerk's office every night before the Fourth of July. Men and boys aided in drawing the weapon to its once-a-year firing ground. For the full 24 hours of the Fourth of July relays of volunteer cannoners serviced the converted railroad axel with blasting powder. Several hundred pounds were used up in a good celebration and buckets of water were tossed on the hot iron to cool it for the next load.

As the years passed and the cannon grew from a novelty to an annual ritual, signs of wear and tear began to show. A younger generation, more cautious or less foolhardy than their fathers, helped Arnold to strengthen the middle of the cannon lest it burst its seams in a last colossal explosion.

For a brief period before the Armistice of 1918 the cannon had been stored away as unsafe. However, when at last after a preliminary false announcement, word was flashed that the warring armies in Europe had ceased firing, the old cannon was innocently hauled from its place of storage and mounted on the small hill in the center of the village. Round after round was fired from the gun without mishap, and then it was hauled away to storage again.

In recent weeks Mrs. Davis and her brother-in-law, 88-year-old John W. Plumley, re-established the ancient cannon to a place of honor on the front lawn of the town clerk's office. For the past few days a battle between sentiment and utility has been waged over the "old thunderer."

Mrs. Davis wanted to dispose of it at once to aid the war effort with its two-hundred pounds of iron. Plumley pointing out that "it don't eat anything" has just as vigorously maintained that the cannon should be saved for a new Armistice day when the United States will again be victorious.

Mrs. Davis won out in the dispute and the junk man claimed the ancient cannon yesterday.

In its long history the cannon never hurt even a sparrow. In fact the only time it hit anything was once when it was fired as a test at a nearby tree. The wadding was blasted into the tree with such force that a hole was gouged in the trunk and for years afterwards a robin nested in the cavity.

Plumley likes to recall the only time the cannon ever left the village of Clarendon Flats. Towards the latter part of the last century patriotic groups held a celebration in Center Rutland, marking the anniversary of the ancient fort there. A horse trough was dedicated at that time and Plumley was asked to bring the cannon, which had already gained a considerable reputation.

Plumley agreed to fire salutes, but told the officials in charge of the celebration that he wouldn't be responsible for any damage that occurred. The officials gladly accepted his terms, and at Plumley's suggestion they warned residents in the area to lower their windows as a precaution against the cannon's concussion.

"Everybody lowered their windows like I told them," Plumley recalls, "but for one obstinate woman who said she wouldn't. Well I had warned her," the octogenarian continued, "so I started firing the old cannon."

Every window in that woman's house facing the cannon was blasted from its sills. Plumley recalls with a chuckle. The town officials footed the bill for new windows and Plumley returned to Clarendon with the cannon, well satisfied.

In a few days the old cannon will be mingled with broken plowshares and discarded jalopies as part of the vast stream of scrap iron that feeds America's roaring war furnaces.

Yes, she was a loud talker all right! Plumley recalls with a sigh as he sits on the shaded porch of the town clerk's house and looks across at the small hill, now vacant, where the Clarendon cannon blasted people from their beds with its roar so many years ago.