

GILMANTON — The water still runs cold and clear in the cistern on Old Belmont Road. The vintage automobile in the garage just a door down can still be coaxed into starting, and having come alive, it purrs softly.

Just two houses in on Cat Alley, Walter Lane's last home stands, largely overgrown by vegetation, empty, as though it were waiting a verdict on its future. It is

The rambling house was, three years ago, the home of the 90-year-old metallurgical chemist, retired, single. Reclusive by all accounts, no one really knew Walter Lane well. His mother and sister — yes, but Walter was known as an eccentric man, if to be eccentric means to know few people, to mingle not at all, to dislike animals.

Walter Lane was born in 1885; some say in Belmont, although records do not ascertain this as fact. He went to Dartmouth, class of "aught-nine," and worked at his profession in the mining areas of Pennsylvania and elsewhere. He traveled a lot, and, while living in Naugatuck, Connecticut, in 1915, he was trying to discover methods for the analysis of brass and bronze. Electrolytic, volumetric.

The chemist retired from Bethlehem Steel's Johnstown, Pennsylvania, plant in October, 1953. At



WALTER LANE

68, he only had fifteen years to go before he was to meet his best and, some say, only friend.

When Lane returned to Gilmanton, he lived in the house his mother and sister had occupied, as had his great aunt before them. Mary Francis Page was still renting rooms to students at the Gilmanton Academy in 1908, and, sometime soon thereafter, Walter's mother Myra, postmaster, moved in, and the boardinghouse became a post office. A photograph of unknown authorship with a hand-scrawled note on the back shows the house in its new role. The note on the back says "until 1919."

The Lanes were a family of readers. Religious publications were a favorite, as were nineteenth century books on diction and humor. Walter had books and articles on various scientific disciplines: J.N.

an orange, and suppose a fly standing still at the top and another fly at the bottom. Now it is clear that the flies cannot see each other, because the orange is between them. But suppose B moves toward A. When it gets to C, A can just see the top of B's head over the edge..."

John Collins moved to Gilmanton in 1968, and it wasn't long before the quiet, unsteady old gent next door had come into his life. Mr. Lane and Mr. Collins, as they always addressed each other, became close. To this day, the most authoritative folk historians here refer inquiries about William and Myra Lane's son to "the only one who really knew him at all." That man is John Collins.

They took shopping trips together, they sat in Walter's house and talked at length. Lane, afraid of animals, as some lonely people so often seem to be,



### Former Post Office

A view of Walter Lane's home circa 1915, when his mother, Myra, was Gilmanton postmaster. The house is now empty, and owner John Collins may have to decide whether to renovate it, move it, or

dismantle it. Lane also owned a cistern and pumphouse on Old Belmont Road, which still provides delicious, crystal clear water.

Maybe, in retrospect, Collins felt it was the sensible thing for Walter to do, but he had not known.

A small brook runs through the Lane property, and even trickles through the cellar itself. Renovation of the property, says Collins, may not be possible because of modern septic system requirements, limited space at the back of the lot, and cost. Moving the house may be the only alternative, and not an attractive one, either.

The historical value of the property is also at issue, and the town historical district commission has appointed an observer to study the house and report back on possible historic considerations.

Collins, a seasoned renovator of houses, earned his status with the reconditioning of his present home, the tavern structure on Rte. 107. He has already done some work on Walter's property, but, as he stands over a tin cup of the crystal water from Lane's cistern, which used to supply water to the

BY DAN NAMOWITZ

# Ponder Fate of Gilmanton's Former Post Office

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## Reading Material

Examples of reading material from Walter Lane's house in Gilmanton Corners reveals variety of taste among Walter Lane, his mother, and sister. Left to right: a section from a 1912 edition of the Christian Science Monitor, a gilt-edged photograph book; an 1884 edition of "Astronomy," by J.N.

Lockyer; open to a diagram; an April, 1915 edition of the People's Home Journal, an edition of the Laconia Democrat (Jan. 18, 1901); a box of Argo photograph developing powder, undated.