

Frederick K. Swift Diary

by Ann Sears

Frederick K. Swift, one of Falmouth's leading cranberry growers, kept a journal in 1900 that today provides a rare record of the era when the berries were the red gold of Cape Cod's economy.

The diary documents the connection between large-scale cranberry cultivation and the growth of the Portuguese speaking community in East Falmouth as well as the year-round struggle to make farming a profitable business. And the notes that Frederick

jotted down almost daily provide a glimpse of life in rural East Falmouth at the turn of century before the arrival of the automobile, electricity and the telephone.

The Swift brothers had arrived in Falmouth from Bourne in 1891 and purchased two defunct woolen mills and mill ponds on the Coonamessett River from Robert Snow of New Bedford. Snow was the son of one of the principals in the former Pacific Manufacturing Co. that had operated the mills for half the century. Earlier 18th century mill owners had dammed the river and created ponds to regulate the flow of water that powered the machinery of grist mills. The conversion of the grist mills to woolen mills began around 1825.

An account of how immigrant workers created the cranberry bogs out of the millponds appeared in a Falmouth Enterprise interview with Frederick's son Paul in the 1950s:

"Finns and Russians from New York City were imported by train. None spoke English and [they] had name tags on their lapels. Their hand labor cut the ditches, dynamited the stumps of old trees in the pond, pulled out the dam and converted the pond into bogs."

Nine years later, in 1900, Frederick was one of three brothers farming 25 acres of cranberry bogs along the lower Coonamessett River. Town assessors records in 1900 show that the Swift Brothers – Frederick, 31, Howard, 42, and Russ, 40 – were one of 80 own-



Frederick K. Swift. Courtesy William Swift, grandson.

ers of 270 acres of cranberry bogs in Falmouth. Most bogs were less than an acre in size. Only the 50 acres of John H. Crocker's Falmouth Cranberry Company exceeded the 39-acre townwide Swift holdings. Crocker, who is not mentioned in the Swift journal, had owned bogs in East Falmouth since 1885, and was locally known as the "Cranberry King."

Frederick Swift was an entrepreneur with a lot of irons in the fire. He served as bookkeeper for the Swift Brothers Company. He sold real estate and gave mortgages making it possible for immigrants from the Portuguese Azores and Cape Verde Islands to settle in Falmouth. During the year he gave mortgages of \$100 to \$200 to the Texeira, Mendoza, and Tavares families at 7 and 8 percent interest. It was a time when the town's only bank, the Falmouth National Bank, was controlled by retired whaling captains who were too conservative to loan money to poor immigrants. Swift was also an enthusiastic hunter, fisherman, cyclist, gardener and musician.

Frederick was married to Zana Tobey, the daughter of an East Falmouth whaling captain. Their son Paul started school in October, 1900. They lived in the house built in 1895 at 15 John Parker Road. Brother Howard and his wife Nellie lived across the street. The Swift Brothers were listed in the town's business directory of 1900 as one of two barrel manufacturers and one of 11 commercial cranberry growers. Their address was Coonamessett, a small neighborhood that had grown up along John Parker Road and Route 28 around the earlier woolen mills. Their company had four stockholders in Boston and Brookline. As bookkeeper, Frederick noted each day the number of hours he and brother Russ charged the company. Howard was the company manager. The Swifts also owned bogs around Flax Pond and two acres on the Moonakis River in Waquoit.



Zana Tobey Swift. Courtesy William Swift, grandson.

The pocket-sized, leather-bound journal is owned by William Swift of Mill Road. Mr. Swift is Frederick's grandson.

In his first notation in the diary on January 8, Frederick Swift records a trip to Boston to buy four bicycle wheels and that he had become the Falmouth agent to sell correspondence courses for the King Richardson school of Springfield.

Wed., Jan 10: "Saw Warren Hamblin. Wants us send team [of horses] get his 15 bbl [barrels] berries to depot & we handle them on com [commission]"

The Swift Brothers served as marketing agents for other growers. Besides Mr. Hamblin, they were also



Lower bog, Falmouth, facing north; formerly owned by Frederick K. Swift. Photo by Dennis Aubrey.

next 20 years. In Falmouth cranberry acreage rose to a high of 270 in 1900, enough to merit a place for cranberry leaves and berries on the town seal.

Sat., Jan. 13 "Shut down boarding, Reservoir and Lower bog – also Parker Road flume"

With this notation, Frederick recorded the flooding of these bogs for the winter to protect the cranberry vines from drying out and dying in freezing winter winds. The growers put wooden boards in the river dikes and dams to raise water levels about a foot above the bogs. The bogs remained flooded until the end of March.

Then its up and away at the crack o' day,
To the marsh that the wild ducks seek.
The best spot find – for the reed thached blind
On the brink of the widening creek.
Decoys afloat – then hide the boat,
And hark! for the whistling whirr –
Of the wings that beat thru the air so fleet
Catch a glimpse of a shadowy blurr –
A whish – h – a splash – as the ducks so rash
Alight in the fatal spot,
A quick sure aim – a jet of flame
And the crack of the smokeless shot.

Fred K. Swift

Through the year the Swifts also flooded the bogs to protect the cranberries from insect infestations, and from late and early frosts. Today's growers continue to flood the bogs for winter protection, but they use embedded sprinkler systems to warm the air above the vines to protect them from late frosts and they rely on pesticides to combat insects.

Sat., Jan. 20 "Rained. I made shelldrake decoy. Pumped tank full."

Fri., Jan. 26, "Russ finished sanding at Waquoit on little dry bog."

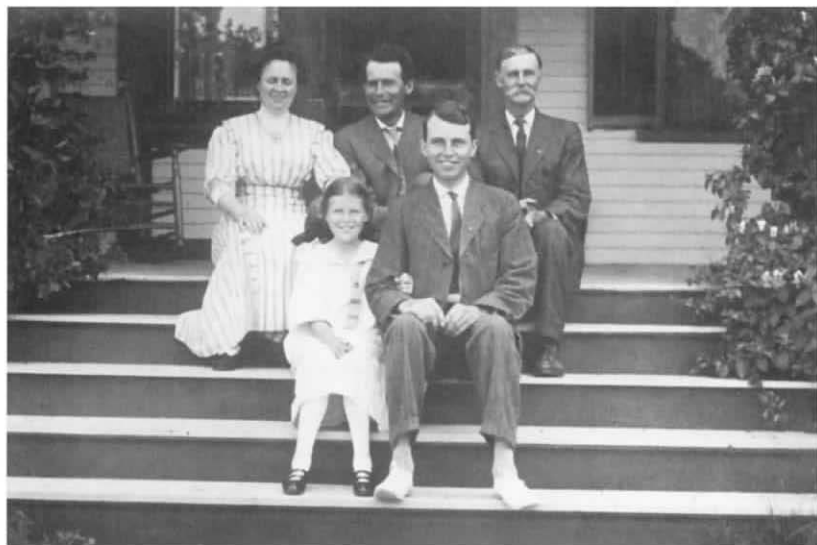
Sanding refers to the practice of covering the bogs with up to two inches of sand every three or so years. It is a continuing practice aimed at stimulating plant growth and suppressing insects and weeds. It is usually done in the winter over the ice that covers the flooded bogs.



Frederick K. and Zana Swift's home, 15 John Parker Road, East Falmouth. Courtesy William Swift, grandson of Frederick K. Swift.

Wed., Feb 14, "Went to W Hole in wheel [by bicycle]. Frank Crocker asked me to stop and have supper with him – and play with him & others in eve so did so. R Bailey & sister and Harry West came in eve and we played 2 guitars banjo mandolin violin, etc."

Winter was a slow period on the bogs. The Swifts sorted berries from the fall harvest and made arrangements to sell them. The berries were stored in the ca. 1825 woolen factory building that stood at the foot of the Lower Bog. The building burned down in 1977. There was also time to pursue other interests— setting up a singing school at the East Falmouth Methodist Church, giving violin lessons, visiting friends, fishing and "gunning."



Frederick K. Swift family. Front: Phebe and Paul Swift; rear: Zana, Fred and unknown. Courtesy William Swift, grandson of Frederick K. Swift.

Fri., March 9, after dropping wife and son at the doctor's office, "I put horse in town sheds and went

to town meeting. Voted to buy Steve Cahoon's lot not to exceed \$10,000 for enlarging library lot. I came home at noon and carted load of cranberries to depot."

The brothers were civic minded. Town meetings were held in the daytime on the second floor of the old town hall on Main Street. Women did not vote. Frederick was chosen a teller (vote counter) that year. He later served on the town finance committee and 12 years on the school board.

On March 19, Frederick and Howard traveled to New Jersey to sell cranberry vine cuttings to new growers in that state. New vines are grown from cuttings. The brothers took the steamer *Pilgrim* from Fall River to New York where they boarded a train to Egypt, NJ.

Wed., April 4, "Will Crocker, Mr. Stearns Ward & I went to Great Pond at 4 a.m. took lunch and stayed all day. Got 4 shelldrakes...."

Sun., April 8, "Issac Baker, Russ Nye, Elwood & Laban Robbins captured Ford Baker & Howard Baker seining last night with 1600 herrings"

In the spring herring swim from the sea to spawning grounds upstream. Using a seining net to catch them was illegal, and the Bakers were fined \$20 for this offense five days later at the Barnstable courthouse. The Coonamessett River is one of the major herring rivers in Falmouth, and the town had previously re-

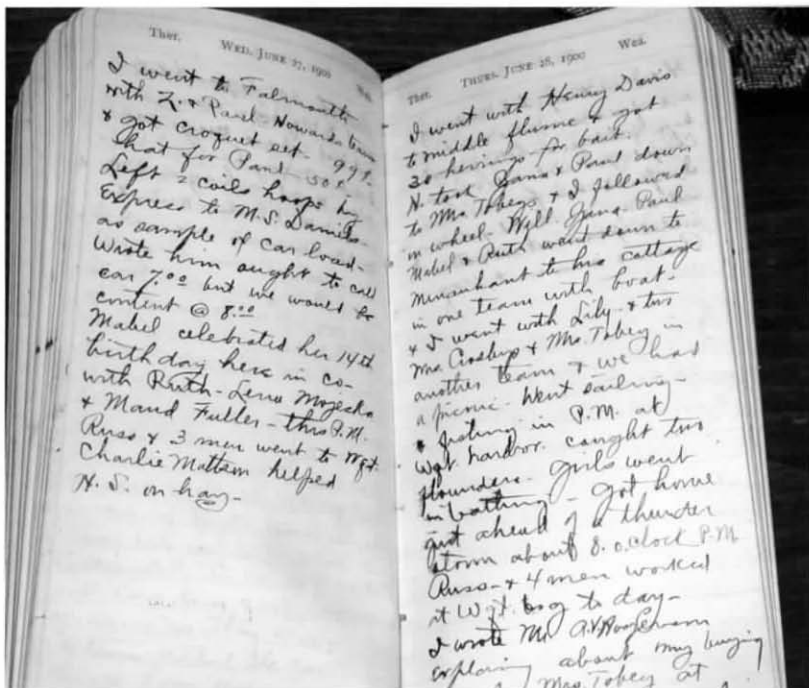
quired the mill owners to build fish ladders at the dams to help herring upstream. The Swifts occasionally mention using herring as bait for larger fish. On Thurs., April 19 Frederick wrote "Got mess herrings at fish house."

Mon., April 9, "H[oward] S[wift] came from Carver today, said engaged 5 Portuguese to come at once."

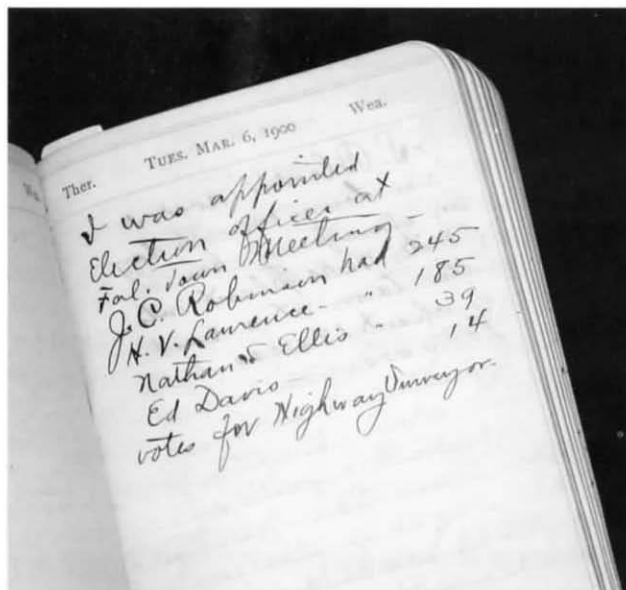
Tues., April 10, "Four or five Portuguese came today & I put them in Parker House..."

Wed., April 11, "Russ, Charlie & four Portuguese & FKS cut 35 bags vines today. I made 10 hrs."

Large-scale operations such as the Swifts' were possible because they could find laborers among the large number of immigrants arriving in New Bedford from



Entries in Frederick K. Swift's 1900 diary. Photo by Janet Chalmers.



Entries in Frederick K. Swift's 1900 diary. Photo by Janet Chalmers.

the Portuguese controlled islands of the Azores and Cape Verde. Some of those who came to work on cranberry bogs were able to buy small farms in East Falmouth. State census records show Falmouth had 81 residents who were Portuguese immigrants in 1895. The figure rose to 283 in 1905 and 658 in 1915.

The new immigrants succeeded in growing strawberries in the previously unproductive sandy soil of East Falmouth. In 1905 Falmouth was the fourth largest producer of strawberries in the state. It was the leading producer in the 1930s when there were 200 growers with 600 acres of strawberry fields in town. Many strawberry farm families supplemented their income with work on the annual cranberry harvest. Both residents and

migrant workers are pictured in photographs taken on the Swift bogs in 1911 by Lewis Hine, the New York City school teacher who was documenting child labor practices.

The men Howard Swift hired on April 9 in Carver, a center of cranberry growing in Plymouth County, worked on the bogs until the end of the harvest in October.

Thurs., April 26 "Mr. Leonard & wife came on 3 p.m. train. Mr. L caught 1 trout & 1 pickerel in our stream."

Fri, April 27, "Mr. L & I went to Wq bog & caught about 10 trout. ..

"The Leonards went back on 4 27 p.m train today. Mr. L. favors stocking the stream Coonamessett with yearlings to cost about 40 or 50 dollars."



Swift's bog, East Falmouth, September 9, 1911. The manager was recorded as saying: "We have 150 workers, beside the kids. There is good money in the cranberry business, our stockholders are never satisfied until they make 25 to 30% dividends." Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

Mr. Leonard was one of the four investors in the Swift Brothers Company, and he is here recommending that the brothers stock the Coonamessett River with trout as had been done in the 1880s.

Frederick often took wealthy investors and prospective investors in the company fishing or "gunning." He arranged for them to stay nearby at Mrs. Issac Baker's and board with Ansel Davis. They caught trout, pickerel and eels and bass. They shot shelldrakes, black ducks, and quail. He invariably notes they caught one or two trout on the Coonamessett, which he refers to as "our stream," but took much larger numbers of trout from the bogs on the Moonakis River in Waquoit.



Going to work, Swift's Bog, East Falmouth, September, 1911. Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

Mon., April 30, "Mr. Ward & I went after eels up our stream in eve. and got 8 or 10 large ones. I broke spear handle & spliced it. Lantern went out & we had to come home early."

Tues., May 1, "Mr. Fenno & I went to Wqt bog & caught 20 trout, 2 of which were 1 1/2 lbs each."

Fri., May 4, "Russ worked the 4 Portuguese in the pasture ditching 6 1/2 hrs. He brought load planks to my house in p.m. for grading with barrow."

Three days later the men set vines on the Flax pond bog. Preparation of a new bog requires care to maintain a level grade without compacting the soil. The workers used newly purchased wheelbarrows on plank paths that were temporarily laid on the bogs.



Building a cranberry bog at Coonamessett. Courtesy John De Costa.

In late May, the brothers watched the thermometer drop and worried about a late frost that could wipe out the crop. Several times they flooded the bogs to protect the vines, but they did not reach all of them before the "hard frost" of May 29.

Thurs., May 31: "Examined for fireworms but found none....Frost has taken a large percent of Early Blacks but only a few Howes..."

In June, the Swifts looked for fireworm and fruitworm, pests that continue to bedevil growers.

In the same week, one of Frederick's fishing companions purchased a small bog from the Swifts for \$1,100. The Swifts and their crew worked the next



Child with two cranberry pails. Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

several days resanding and weeding the bog. They applied guano fertilizer. They put up a wire fence so a neighbor's "cows would not eat green cranberries . . . In p.m. we looked on our bogs for worms.—saw three in all far apart."



Carrie Medeiros, age 12. Her second year of picking cranberries. Taken at Swift's Bog, Falmouth, 1911. Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

Wed., June 20: "I shut planks down in lower bog- new dike- to flow for fruitworm miller. Drained the bog the next morning and it was dry by 9 a.m.,"

Sun., July 1, "After dinner Zana, Paul and I walked to the head of Great Pond on sand cliffs. Elegant, cool day!"

Mon., July 2, "In pm we went to Green Pond & got mess of crabs."

Tues., July 3, "Mr. Ward & I went to Great Pond and dug some clams & oysters for bake tomorrow."

Wed., July 4, "Had a clambake & crabs & oysters, watermelon, etc. Went in bathing. Had some fireworks at our house in eve."

The Swifts spent the Fourth of July at a cottage in Menauhant with a group of 15 friends and family members. On other social occasions someone would bring ice to make ice cream, or they would play a game of whist.

Thurs., July 19, "Saw fire in woods N E of us." The early 20th century was a period of numerous fires among the scrub trees in the woods of the Cape, and Frederick noted the fires he saw.

Fri., July 20 "Went with Will Tobey to Lila Bakers' and sang with Mr. Pepper & Florence Barrows in evening. Returning in wheel had head on collision with Wq lad. I escaped injury and did not hurt wheel much. But his wheel was busted."

Mon., July 23. "Harry Bourne came down & got Charlie Mattson to buy some beer of John Emerald – he is about to pull him in."

Sat July 28 "H[oward] went to B[uzzards] Bay as witness with Harry Bourne – who took John Emerald for selling liquor – Charlie Mattson principal witness – Emerald was fined \$75.00."

John Emerald was one of the first Portuguese immigrants to settle in Falmouth. He lived in the John Parker Road

neighborhood, owned a cranberry bog and is credited with introducing the growing of strawberries to the Portuguese community. Earlier that year Frederick had purchased 100 privet hedges from Emerald. Although Emerald eventually moved to Brockton, other members of the family remained in Falmouth. Bourne was a town constable, and Mattson a local farmer.

Tues., July 31, "H[oward] & I drove over to Penzance and saw several hot air engines. Owners were all away so await their written terms."

This curious notation about a visit to the wealthy summer resort area of Woods Hole may relate to the year-long difficulty Frederick had with the engine he was using to run the pump providing running water at home. Or it may relate to plans to heat the



Manuel Rose, age 9, and Lena Rose, age 7, at Swift's Bog, 1911. In his report to the National Child Labor Committee Lewis Hine told he had found the labor situation in the cranberry industry, "very different from the common idea that the Cape Cod Yankees..." pick the bogs, "picnic fashion with their families." Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.



Balmeda Souza, 4, and Amelia Louise Souza, 12, September 20, 1911, Falmouth. Amelia picks 22 measures. Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

basement of the old mill building where the berries were stored.

In early August the Swifts vacationed at Sagamore Beach in Bourne and Frederick gives a detailed account of how they reached the cottage.

Tues., Aug 7, "Howard with Paul, Lawrence, Bob and a load of outfit drove to Sagamore beach in top democrat – Zana, Nellie & Winnie R – went to Fal[mouth] on wheels and by rail to Sagamore and thence to Ben Bourne's cottage on wheels, & I rode all the way on bicycle."

The brothers began preparing for the harvest on their return to Falmouth in mid-August. They asked the stockholders for a harvest fund. They sought \$500 each from A. L. Lincoln and E.W. Leonard, \$250 from N. H. Crocker, and \$200 from E. N. Fenno. In March, Frederick had sent the investors checks

for \$300 and \$500 and in May he had sent an unspecified balance in bog dividends.

On August 29, Frederick took a train to Wareham, rented a team and drove to South Carver where he bought three (cranberry) scoops for \$2.50. Two days later he "engaged Fred Baker to assist bussing pickers . . . and the Davisville girls to screen." He purchased Joe Rose's cranberries for \$4.00 a barrel.

Sat., Sept. 1, "We began harvesting this morning. Picked 26 1/2 bbls Flax[pond bog], 22 1/2 bbls T. Graves in chaff – about 90 pickers."

Sun., Sept. 2 "Theodoro Teixeira came today with mortg from his ma to me of place bought from Cap Weston S. Wqt. Amt \$100 – 1 yr 8 %."

In the next six weeks, the brothers scrambled to supervise 128 workers, deliver barrels of berries to the train station and negotiate by telegram for the highest prices from Midwest wholesalers. The railroad was indispensable to the business. During the harvest, the brothers ordered about two freight cars a week. The berries were delivered to the Falmouth depot in horse-drawn wagons. The brothers and several neighbors were also the "bosses" supervising the pickers. The wives "worked book," keeping count of the berries turned in by the pickers.

Fri., Sept. 7, "Sent off 2nd car, billed order S. Bros. (notify Psychke Bros., Kansas City) Chicago."

Wed., Sept. 12 "H[oward] and I went to Fal. in a.m., telegraphed 4 parties in Chicago."

The journal is filled with the numbers of barrels sent to the depot, the railroad cars ordered, and the bids from Midwest dealers. On several occasions Fred cycled to town to send off telegrams on the availability of a carload of 200 barrels of berries. Buyers wired back bids ranging from \$4 to \$7 a barrel. On Oct. 23 he reported using the telephone for the first time. He had "telephoned" from Falmouth to the railroad agent in Providence.

Sept 20 "There was a light frost. We did not flow bogs . . . Lost no berries - am keeping pasture bog flowed for rootworms."

Thurs., Oct. 4, "Howard with about 60 pickers & his Wq boss & Nellie in books took one gang, and Russ & Mr. R with Zana took balance, about 60 pickers & got off about 130 bbls in p.m. from Parker bog."

Mon., Oct. 15, "Paid off most of pickers today. I took mortg of 140 on F.B Mendoza Wqt."



Young cranberry pickers on their way to work, 1911. Photo by Lewis W. Hine. Spinner collection, Falmouth Historical Society.

The journal does not mention where the harvest workers lived although there are two references to the "Finn shanties," off John Parker Road. It also does not mention what they were paid. In September, the brothers tried out four boys at 35 cents a barrel for eleven barrels. The boys soon quit, he noted. In December, Howard paid Frederick's wife Zana \$16 for the hours she worked "keeping book" and screening and packing, the diary noted.

Clues to the earlier history of the Manual Emerald House on Davisville Road as a band hall turned up in Frederick Swift's 1900 diary. The Emerald House is now owned by the town and operated by the Falmouth Service Center as a thrift shop and museum of the Portuguese Strawberry Farming community.

In 1900 the house was owned by a group of East Falmouth musicians who called it the band hall. They may have built it after purchasing the site in 1895 from Jabez Baker.

Fri., May 25 "Band boys met at C. Chase's shop and agreed to sell the band hall without land @175, with land 225"

Sat., July 28, "Got Bert Fish, Loring Banker & Ford B. to sign deed of Band hall to Jabez Baker for \$125.—all have now signed except Bert Baker & Harry Howard Baker."

Jabez Baker sold it to Mr. Souza. In 1903 Mr. Souza sold it to Manuel Emerald who became one of Falmouth's successful strawberry farmers. Mr. Swift held the mortgage.

With today's mechanized equipment, grower Brian Handy harvests the Swift bogs on the Coonamessett and many more cranberry bogs with just eight workers. He brings them from Puerto Rico for two to three months and provides housing. In 2003 they were paid \$9 plus an hour. The berries are trucked to the Ocean Spray cooperative, which handles marketing and delivery.

Mon., Oct 22, "Russ, Joe Perry, Manuel Cabral & another man worked pulling grass in Parker Bog-8 hrs each."

After the harvest, the Swifts turned to weeding the bogs. The brothers also visited other growers, purchased their berries and made arrangements to ship or store them.

Sat., Dec. 1, "Wrote HCS [Howard C. Swift] that I am liable to be occupied greater part of all winter in our cranberry business - as we are buying & shipping & have about 1500 bbls yet in hand. Would be willing to turn over my books etc to anyone they may select."

Frederick apparently continued on in his role as bookkeeper. He later wrote that Howard will give him a half commission on the harvest from the Coonamessett and Waquoit bogs next year.

Christmas brought gifts of a watch and chain for Zana, skates for son Paul, and Frederick participated in a "*cantata on the occasion of xmas tree*" in Falmouth Village. In 1900 Christmas trees were a new part of Christmas observances in town.



Frederick K. Swift. Courtesy William Swift, grandson.

New Year's Eve brought Frederick's last notation. A dike "*had given way last night—reported no damage to other bogs*"

Howard and Frederick Swift continued to operate the cranberry bogs until their deaths in 1928. Russ was killed in a shooting accident in 1903.

The Coonamessett bogs remained in the family until the early 1930s when they were sold to J.J. Beaton of Wareham. In 1971 the town purchased the Coonamessett bogs from the American Cranberry Co. to preserve them from development. A town committee is now considering ways to improve the health of the river and the future of the bogs.

Ann Sears works part time as administrator of the town's Historical Commission. She co-authored with Nancy Kougeas a picture history of the town called *Images of Falmouth* and has previously written about the town's Old Burying Ground for *Spritsail*. A former newspaper reporter, she has lived in Falmouth since 1980. She served as the first executive director of the Falmouth Historical Society.