

## RURAL LIVING DURING THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

I put the emphasis on rural, for at this time the gap in living conditions between town and country was much wider than it is today. Hydro and the motor car helped to change this.

Just about 50% of our people today have recollections of those years and it might be interesting to see how much we remember and how things have changed.

I don't remember the use of candles or cooking on open fireplaces. They were gone with the old century, but we have homes in our community today where you can see where the fireplaces and bake ovens are. The most are boarded up but the evidence of their existence can still be seen. The candles were made from (sheeps) tallow, melted and poured into molds, a cotton wick was placed in the centre to feed the flame, when the tallow hardened the forms were removed.

One of my earliest recollections was the making of soft soap. This process took place about the middle of May. One of the spring cleaning chores. Good hard wood ashes were saved and placed in a large wooden barrel, set up on blocks so the lye could drip out into a large container. The barrel was slightly tipped and a hole bored to let the lye run off. Water was poured on top of the ashes, small amounts at a time as it washed down to the bottom, produced the lye from the ashes. It was a very dark brown liquid. All the drippings, waste fat and pork rinds, even large pieces of fat pork, were kept during the winter. When soap making time came, a large black iron kettle was hung suspended on a frame built outdoors. The fat and a quantity of lye was put in the kettle, not too full, then a fire was lit and kept burning under the kettle to keep it boiling until a smooth jelly substance was formed and this was our soft soap. It was then stored in crocks or pails for future use. It was not always possible to boil it down enough in one day, so the process went on until completed. It was a dangerous procedure, as all fires are, if one is not careful. A young mother was burned to death one day, in our community. If fat boils over on fire, the blaze is terrific, this caught her long flowing skirts which they wore in those days and as it was seeding time, the men were out in the fields and did not see or hear her cries. After that my mother was not allowed to make soap when she was alone. I was kept away from playing around the fire, by telling me the sad story. The sight of that black kettle struck terror in my soul.

What was the soap used for? Well, almost everything except washing your face or taking a bath in the wash tub. It was wonderful for scrubbing floors and there were lots of maple floors in those days with nothing on the wood, but soft soap and elbow grease to keep them white. Then it was used for the laundry and lots of homes had nothing but a wash board and tub. So there were no lilly-white hands with painted nails. You were lucky to have nails ...period. However, don't ever think it didn't clean well. It did a better job than the Mr. or Mrs. Clean product we have advertized nowadays.

Where did we get all the fat pork and grease to make it? Well, for the average family of 5 or 6, at least 6 fat hogs were butchered for the year's meat supply. There was a certain amount of waste fat so it was kept for soap. A lot of it came off the side of my plate. How I hated fat meat and as I was the youngest I sat beside my father and slipped a lot on his plate, but there was a limit to what he could take so I was encouraged to eat my fat with the lean (sometimes I was threatened". We had a neighbour who didn't believe it profitable to house and feed his pigs so they roamed the neighborhood to see

what they could find. As I was a pre-schooler it was my job with the help of a faithful dog to keep them out on the road. I can see them yet. .big red long snouted razor backs, with vicious eyes and if you were unfortunate enough to get close you would see they had big lice which in turn, I think, were lousy too. If they ever got in the yard, no diesel tractor today could plough a furrow any deeper than they could. My father threatened to buy one of these to kill for me, so I wouldn't have fat meat to eat. I guess you could call that child psychology...it worked. However, the wonderful meals of cured hams, tender loins, spare ribs which were not spare of tender meat like today, compensated for the times, side meat was served.

How many remember the old cook house, not in very good shape I'm afraid. They had been there a long time. It was just used to house the cook stove for hot weather. As a fire had to be made even to boil the kettle...no screens on windows or doors...no use... too many other places open. So the flies flew in and the flies flew out. However, the food was prepared in the house proper and just cooked in the stove. I was always suspicious of pickles that contained whole cloves. Then at last it was replaced with spanking new kitchens complete with screens, you could even eat in it, until the weather got too hot. We no longer called it the cook house, it was the summer kitchen but it had the same yellow paint on the floor and got afresh coat every spring...there was usually enough to give the churn a coat. Everything was painted either yellow, dark grey or dark brown. If they had other colors these were the three found in most homes. I shy away from them yet.

Rag carpets and straw ticks had been pretty well replaced by the turn of the century but most homes had one room with rag carpet which was taken up once a year and cleaned outside. No vacuum cleaners, they had to be swept with a broom well moistened or you would get the impression one was threshing peas with a flail. Then the one bed with the straw tick was taken out to the barn and emptied each spring and filled with fresh straw. The feather tick which was placed on top of the straw was also taken out and put on the line to air in the warm sunshine. So with new oat straw in one and Mother Goose's feathers all fluffed up in the sun, it was a battle who would sleep in that bed for the first time. To a small child it was like sleeping on a cloud, even if you needed a step ladder to get into bed.

My memory takes me back to the great quantities of apples, stored in a darkened cool cellar. Mother peeled and cored apples at night placing them in a wire rack high over the cook stove. These were called dried apples and were stored in cotton sugar sacks for future use, when the fresh apples were done. Like fat meat, I hated dried apple pie, but I could eat them stewed with cream, which was always on the table. How I long for a good feed of snappy russets mealy sheep snouts with water cores, rich pippins etc.. These varieties are only found in special fruit markets today.

Another home product long since gone was yeast made from the real hops. This was made by steeping the hops, after they were dried and mixing the liquid with mashed potatoes, sugar etc.. and leaving for a period of time to ferment. Then a quantity of this was used to leaven the flour for bread. After the first batch of yeast was made a cup was always kept to start a new lot, shortening the time of fermentation. It made delicious bread. Most homes had a hop vine some place near the garden, they would climb up and over anything. I know several homes where these are still growing and the younger generation haven't a clue as to what they are or how they got there. The growing of hops was a lucrative business at one time as they were sold to the breweries for making beer. I have been told that one of the homes in this community was built from the money made by growing hops.

Then there was the raising of a few sheep. At one time, this was necessary for wool alone, as they depended on it for the weaving of cloth and yarn for knitting socks, but this was more in the 1800. Spinning and weaving are not a lost craft as we have people today excelling in this art so I will not dwell on that. However, I do remember that each farmer put a mark on his sheep and turned them out on the highway or road as we said then, to live on the grass on the sides. They would come home to drink and sleep at night as dogs have always been their enemies. To me they were an awful nuisance. I always remember the story of the teacher who asked little Johnny a question in arithmetic... if there were 24 sheep in a field and one jumped the fence, how many would be left. None was the reply. The teacher said "Johnny I'm afraid you don't know your arithmetic" and Johnny said "I'm afraid, Miss Smith, you don't know your sheep".

We would not like to give up all our modern conveniences and return to the good old days, as I have often heard them referred to and others say "What was good about them?" However happiness is just a state of mind. We lacked nothing when it came to entertainment, simple though it may seem now. I would say our childhood was extremely happy.

*Mrs L Davis*