

Things My Grandmother Told Me

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How far away it seems — and yet as yesterday. Those dear eyes have been closed for almost thirty years; those busy hands have been still so long.

Born in Woolwich Township, Waterloo County, in the early 1830's, Grandmother lived all her life in the same community. Her parents were of English stock, and had settled in Winterbourne after coming from the State of Vermont, where they had first lived after emigrating from the Old Country. Grandma married when about thirty-seven years of age, and was almost seventy when I, her first grandchild, was born. Needless to say, I was made a great deal of, and many were the interesting stories she related to me.

One poignant event she used to tell of the early days was when Asiatic Cholera was raging through the country. A family had been noticed settling farther back in the woods, then sickness hit their own home, so that no visit had been paid to the newcomers. One day her father said, "Something is wrong up the road in the new cabin — there is no smoke. We must go and see." They found a man and his wife nearly dead with Cholera, and a dear wee baby boy crying in his cradle. They stayed with the stricken folk and comforted them as best they could, but help had come too late, and when they died, Great Grandfather carried the little fellow home. They did not know the name of his family so they called him John Goodchild. He stayed with them on their own, and when grown to manhood, went to the West as a Methodist minister.

My Grandmother's teachings have followed me down through the years. I remember her saying, "Never forget, Cleanliness is next to Godliness"; and again, "Never put off till to-morrow, what you can do to-day"; another bit of advice — "A stitch in time saves nine" — how neat those stitches were — how orderly her sewing basket. "If you have nothing good to say of a person, say nothing." This axiom has come back to me repeatedly when I have been tempted to speak critically of others.

Undertakers were very scarce in the early days, and Grandma was often called when death visited a neighbouring household. How many times she closed the sightless eyes and folded the tired hands. There were the little ones, who scarcely knowing life, were taken away with one of the treacherous epidemics prevalent in those days. A young nephew on the next farm developed the dread diphtheria — a homemade swab was being used to try to keep the throat open — the swab became loose and the poor child choked to death — the next night the tiny sister died of the same ailment — "How grim were those days! And they are all buried in the old Churchyard." Her own small brother, Tommy, was subject to croup. One night, during a particularly bad spasm, he strangled — there was no help, and so he slipped away; but

"All was not trouble," she would say — "The fun we had! Quiltings, tea meetings, concerts. My first party dress was of salmon silk and was made for me when I was twenty-one. Parties! We played games and danced 'The Lancers' to the music of the violin." One game was called the Philippine. Partners were chosen, hazelnuts were distributed, the nuts were broken open. If a twin nut was found by a couple, that couple was supposed to be partners for life. "It didn't always work out that way, but it caused a lot of amusement."

When a baby announced its coming into the world, Grandmother was frequently asked to help. While this event usually brought joy to the home, it was a time of great anxiety. All too often tragedy would strike, leaving a motherless family. Doctors were so few and so far away. Pre-natal care was unheard of. "The old cemeteries bear witness to this sad truth."

Barn Raisings were social events in Grandmother's youth. Men were asked to do the work and the women did the cooking. Two meals a day were served, each family returning daily. The final night, a big party on the new barn floor was always looked forward to, and "Many a girl met her mate at one of these homely functions."

Grandmother's cooking will never be forgotten — the luscious buttermilk pastry, the salt-rising bread, rivals (this was a way of making yeast which was passed from one neighbour to another), her way of making dressing, her mouth-watering gingerbread, her buckwheat pancakes, set to rise on the back of the massive wood stove, her fried cakes, and her apple fritters which melted in your mouth. Oh! to be a child once more in my Grandmother's kitchen, tasting her goodies, and listening to her tell how she made each one.

The Grand River was once navigable for boats up as far as Winterbourne, so Grandmother told me, and she recalled a flax mill going down the river at the time of the spring flood. Winterbourne at that time was a thriving village, with several saw mills, a tannery, two churches and two stores.

She talked of log drives on the Grand River at freshet time, of fields being cleared, logs prepared and cabins erected. The river teemed with fish, and a few minutes with rod and line provided a welcome change of diet for our pioneers.

Grandmother used to tell how she fostered a romance. It seemed her friend Betsy wanted to marry the man of her choice, but her parents were against the match. Grandma drove to Betsy's home, and going right up to her bedroom, threw her clothing out the window to her chum waiting below. Then she stayed and visited with the parents to distract them, while the young couple slipped away to be married. "'Twas a happy marriage, I was never sorry," she would say with a chuckle.