

The Colby Family
By
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1927

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In the fall of 1926 I visited my brother, his wife, their son and his wife, who are living on the farm in the State of Maine where I was born and lived for twenty-two years. Although I have visited the place several times since leaving home, I was very much impressed by the changes that have taken place during that comparatively short period, and still more impressed by the changes that have been made since the first settlers took up their abode near the western border of the state about two hundred years ago. So interested have I been that I venture to narrate briefly what I can remember and what my parents and grandparents told me of what was done in their time, and to compare it with what we find there today.

The land in that part of the state was unlike that of the western plains and prairies. It was quite uneven with hills, valleys, brooks, rivers, ponds and lakes. The soil was hard and gravelly and full of stones of varying sizes from pebbles to boulders, making it hard to convert into good farms without much hard labor. The surface was covered with large trees and underbrush and an accumulation of decayed vegetable matter. The men and women of the present generation would think it a hard task if they were obliged to clear the land and make themselves a home, with very primitive tools, and raise a large family of sturdy boys and girls as our ancestors did. The young men and women in those times did not leave their country home and go to the city as they have since been doing, but stayed in the country and made themselves homes.

Clearing the Land

The first thing to be done was to go into the wilderness and build a hut of logs and in it a fireplace of stones and clay. The next thing was to cut down the trees and bushes. The pine timber was sawed for

building purposes or drawn to the bank of a brook or river in winter by oxen and in the spring when the water was high, rolled into the water and driven down to a saw mill or to the seacoast, where it was manufactured into building material. After saving some of the other wood for the fireplace, the rest was set on fire as it lay on the ground. The large trees which were not consumed in this way were then gathered into piles and burned. The land was then covered with stumps and stones. The stumps, except the very large ones, which were dug out later, were taken out with a stump machine. This consisted of a pair of large wheels, six or eight feet in diameter connected by an axle made of oak or elm about twelve inches square, with a tongue fifteen or more feet long attached to this. When used the axle was placed over the stump, the tongue raised to a vertical position, a chain was put around the roots of the stump and around the axle. The tongue was then drawn down to the ground, winding the chain around the axle and lifting the stump.

The large stones were taken out in the same way. The stones were carried off on a stone drag and made into stone walls to form the line fences between adjacent farms or to divide the fields from the pastures.

As the ground was full of roots, plowing was impossible, but with the use of the hoe, corn was planted for the first crop. In this virgin soil, enriched with ashes, which is a good fertilizer, the corn produced a good crop. Brakes and bushes would come up and if allowed to grow would crowd out the corn. These were dug out with the hoe two or three times during the summer. The next year more stumps and stones were taken out and the land planted with corn or beans, and treated during the summer as before. By this time the roots had become sufficiently rotted to permit the use of the plow. The ground between the large stumps and stones was plowed and this year it was usually sowed with rye. Each succeeding year the land was improved and finally seeded down to produce

grass for pasture in summer and hay for the cattle in winter. Each year more trees were cut down, burned and treated in the same way until a farm was produced.

The very large pine stumps were removed and placed side by side for a fence, called a stump fence. Some of the very large stumps and stones remained in the ground for many years. I can remember helping to dig stumps and stones from our farm as many as seventy years after it was first cleared up. We used to drill a hole down deep into a large stone, put in a charge of gunpowder and break the stone into several pieces.

This new land produced good crops of grain and vegetables, giving the family plenty of food to eat and some to exchange for other things not raised on the farm. With hard work and industry the family became independent and able to build for themselves better homes.

Houses

The houses may be classed in three groups; first, the log house, second, the one-story frame house, the typical New England farm house, and third, the two-story Colonial house. The log house usually contained but one or two rooms. The one room house would have a large fireplace made of stone and clay on one side. I have heard it said that the fireplace was sometimes so large that it took a yoke of oxen to draw the back log into it. How the team of oxen got through the door into the house was not mentioned! The chimney was sometimes made of sticks of wood and clay and was called a cat chimney. On another side of the room would be the bed, with high bed posts. In place of springs, which were unheard of, a rope was strung crosswise and lengthwise and drawn up tightly. This was covered with a tick filled with corn husks or straw, possibly on top of this was a feather bed. Under the bed might be a trundle bed which was drawn out at night for the children. These beds were covered with home-made blankets, quilts and comforters.

The doors were made of matched boards fastened together with cleats and hung with leather or wooden hinges. On the inside of the front door was a wooden latch to which a string was attached and the string put through a hole to the outside. When the family closed up the house at night they drew the string inside so that the door could not be opened from the outside. The old saying, "Our latch string is always out" means that visitors are always welcome.

The few cooking utensils, dishes, table, clothing, and all of the family belongings were in this room. On the floor were braided rugs made from cast-off clothing. Poles were suspended from the ceiling, on which would be found clothing, strips of pumpkin or strings of quartered apples hung up to dry. A lean-to or shed might be added where some dry wood could be kept.

I can remember going into a house such as above described on my way to school on cold winter mornings to get warm. We were always welcomed by Uncle ^{Naham Witham} ~~Nathan~~ and Aunt Sabry, as they were called. Uncle Naham ~~Nathan~~ was a shoemaker and his bench was in this room.

A two-room log house would have an entry at the middle of one side and two fire-places, placed back to back, one for each room. One room was used for the kitchen and living room and the other was the parlor and spare bedroom. A steep flight of stairs or a ladder would lead up to the attic where the children slept. The beds were warmed by a warming pan, a covered vessel filled with hot ashes and live coals and attached to a long handle.

A very important part of the country home was the barn, in which the cattle, hay and grain were kept. Most of the hard work on the farm was done with oxen. The barn was made of hewn timber pinned together and covered with rough boards and shingles. The shingles were split out of pin^e timber and shaved with a drawing knife. These shingles have been

known to last thirty or forty years. When a barn was to be built, a man was hired to come and hew the logs into square sticks for the sills, posts, beams rafters, etc. A carpenter then came and laid out the frame ready to be put together, all mortised and tenoned. The neighbors were invited to the "raising", when all helped put the frame in place and were treated with rum and perhaps a good supper.

When a family had become able to have a better home, they built a frame house of hewn timber. A typical house would be of one story containing four or five rooms in the main part with two or three fireplaces. To this might be added a narrower part, running either parallel with the main part or at right angles, forming an L. This part would contain a kitchen, wood shed, carriage house and a pig pen, in the order named. On one side of the kitchen was another fire place, made of brick. On one side of the fire-place was a brick oven and on the other a kettle set in brick. The oven was used for baking and smoking hams and bacon. The arch kettle, as it was called, was used for boiling the clothes on washing day or boiling pumpkins and small potatoes for the cow^w or hog that was being fattened for the winter's supply of meat. In the fire-place was a pair of andirons. A crane^e was hung from one side on which were several hooks of different lengths to hold the tea kettle, pots and other kettles. Beside the fire-place stood a long-handled fire shovel and tongs made by the blacksmith. Some families might possess a small hand bellows. The sink was of wood having a wooden spout running out into the garden. There were no traps in those days and no need for a plumber. Poles were suspended from the ceiling and used as in the log house.

There was a cellar under the main part of the house where the vegetables, barrels of salt pork and beef, and other stores were kept from freezing in winter and kept cool in summer. To prepare a meal the housewife needed only to go down cellar and select what she wanted. The attic was used for various purposes. At first the house might

be painted red, but usually it was white with green blinds.

Families who were very well to do built two story houses in Colonial style, invariably painted white with green blinds. Many of the houses that were built a hundred and fifty years ago are still standing and being kept up in good condition. In front of every house was the "dooryard" in which was the wood pile. In many cases it will be found there today.

Water Supply

In that hilly uneven country there were many springs where the water came to the surface, then disappeared and again came to the surface, eventually finding its way to a brook or pond. When near the house these springs furnished a never failing supply of pure water for all purposes. When too far away, the water was brought to the house in lead pipes or aquaducts made of logs having a hole bored through them and fastened together end to end. In either case they were laid under ground to prevent freezing. Wells were the principal source of water supply. These were dug to the depth of ten to thirty feet and lined with stones, leaving an opening about three feet in diameter. A windlass or well sweep to which a pail or bucket was attached, was used for drawing water. Suction and chain pumps were commonly used. Frequently a pump was placed in the center of the town for general use and was called the "town pump". Along the road side one frequently found a watering trough kept full of water from a nearby spring, at which horses and oxen eagerly quenched their thirst. The man who provided a trough was allowed a certain amount on his yearly tax bill.

Food and Products

Before the settlers could raise sufficient food on their land, especially those of small means and large families, the food problem was not an easy one. It was sometimes quite difficult for the poorer families to get enough food. They were often obliged to make a meal on a bowl of

bean or pea pottage, or potatoes and milk. There was some wild game, such as deer, coons, squirrels, partridges, wild geese, ducks and pigeons. If the men were fortunate enough to have a flintlock gun and some ammunition they might be able to get something of this kind to help out. My father told the story of a flock of wild geese that flew over one cold, wet day, and seeing some tame geese in a barn yard, came down and went into the barn with them. They were frightened away, however, by the sheep that were in the barn. Wild pigeons were very plentiful and could be caught in nets in large quantities. There was a good variety of fish also in the brooks, rivers and ponds. Indian corn, beans, peas, rye, potatoes, eggs and meat were the principal sources of food. Brown bread, beans, Indian pudding, white bread and pies were baked in the brick oven on Saturday. During the week when it was necessary to do more baking a pan of biscuit, gingerbread or a Johnny cake would be put into a "Dutch oven" or leaned against a flat iron and placed before the open fire to bake. Butter and cheese were made in almost every family. For butter, the milk was put into pans in the cellar for the cream to rise. This was skimmed off and when enough was gathered for a "churning", it was put into the churn and churned until the butter "came". During the hot weather in the summer it was difficult to make good butter. The milk which had been set away until enough until enough was obtained for a cheese, was put into a large kettle and warmed. Rennet, which the housewife had made from the stomach of a pig or calf, was put in to turn the milk into curd. This curd was cut up and put into a basket, in which was a cheesecloth, to allow the whey to run off. The curd was salted and put into a hoop and pressed. Then the cheese was put on a shelf to cure. It had to be turned and greased every day for some time before it was "ripe".

In the late fall a fatted cow was killed. Some of the meat was hung in a cool place to be used in early winter. The rest was put into

brine and used as corned or salted beef. The hide was sent to the tanner to be made into leather. A fattened hog was also killed. The head and feet were made into head cheese. The shoulders, hams and belly pieces were put into brine and smoked in the brick oven or smoke house in the winter. Some of the meat was made into sausage.

Nearly every family had some apple trees, usually set along by the side of the fence or stone wall or in orchards. A greater part of the apples were taken to the cider mill and made into cider which was freely drunk. Enough was saved for vinegar. Apple butter or cider apple sauce was made by boiling sweet apples in boiled down cider.

Soft soap was the soap mostly used. It was made by filling a barrel with wood ashes and adding water until it came to the top. This was allowed to stand a few days and drawn off in the form of lye. All the grease that had been saved during the year was put into a large kettle and tried out, then put into a barrel with the lye and stirred for several days, when it was ready to use.

Tallow candles were made either by running in molds or by dipping. To dip, a number of wicks, five or six, made of candle wicking, were put on a wooden stick about the size of a pencil and twelve or more inches long, and then dipped several times in a kettle of melted tallow, quite a large number of sticks was used and a quantity of candles made at a time. The dipping caused the tallow to sink down in the kettle. This was remedied by adding water which sunk keeping the tallow at the top of the kettle until it was all used up.

Heat and Light

Wood, which was plentiful, was the fuel used in the fire-places. The pine trees that had lain on the ground for many years and partly decayed were dug out from under the leaves and the part not rotted, especially the knots, would be found to contain much pitch. This pitch wood, as

it was called, was much used, especially in the evening, for it produced both heat and light. I studied my school lessons before such a fire.

In early days, in a house such as described above, the tallow candle was the principal source of light. For use in the barn it was put into a tin lantern which was punched full of holes. After the candle came the whale oil lamp, made of glass, which was used until the introduction of coal oil or kerosene. Friction matches were not always obtainable in the early days. Each family had a piece of steel and a flint from which they could get a spark. into punk or other tinder and blow it into a blaze by the breath or hand bellows. Neighbors/^{often} had to borrow fire from each other by taking a pan or kettle and bringing home some live coals in hot ashes.

Clothing

While the men were busy with their work outside the women had plenty to do in the house. They took the wool as it came from the sheep, washed and carded it into rolls, spun and wove it into cloth, dyed and made it into clothes. They spun and wove the flax and made their own linen. Cotton was not generally used until after the invention of the cotton gin in 1792. Broad cloth was brought over from England but was quite expensive. When a young man reached the age of twenty-one he was often given a broadcloth suit of clothes.

Boots and shoes were made by the shoemaker. The cowhide that had been sent to the tannery the year before was brought home in the form of upper leather which had been curried down to an even thickness and made pliable. Sole leather was made from ox hide not curried. In the case of a large family the shoemaker would bring his bench to the house and make boots and shoes for the whole family. He had but a few lasts, making the different sizes by putting pieces of leather on the last. The lasts were straight, not rights and lefts. It was claimed the shoes made that way

When the shoemaker was through with one family he

went to another. I can remember when a shoemaker with a wooden leg came to our house and stayed two or three weeks. My father and brother made the pegs for the soles of the shoes out of maple wood they took from the wood pile.

Transportation

The early settlers traveled on foot or on horseback. As there were no roads, trails were made through the woods by chopping bark off the trees, making white spots which could be seen in the thick forest. After roads were made various wheeled vehicles came into use, the buckboard, gig, wagon, oxcart, stage coach and chaise. Sleds, pungs and sleighs were used in the winter. The stage coach went from town to town carrying passengers, mail and small articles. Mail was delivered two or three times a week. In almost every town there was an inn which would not be complete without a bar and a dance hall.

Recreations, Amusements, etc.

In the fall at harvest time husking parties and apple paring bees were much enjoyed. In the winter when the evenings were long, kissing and dancing parties, singing schools and sleigh rides brought the people together. At the kissing party games were played that required the members of the group to pay a "forfeit", when he or she was made to go through a performance in which kissing was the principal part. For instance John would be required to make a bob sled with Mary. John would kneel on one knee, Mary would sit on the other and the two would kiss. Then John would kneel on the other knee, Mary would change position accordingly, and they would kiss again. Several games were played which lasted well into the night. A lunch of apples, cider and doughnuts would complete the entertainment. There was always a fiddler in the neighborhood who could play the old time tunes such as Money Musk, Fisher's Hornpipe, Devil's Dream, The Girl I Left Behind Me, etc. The dancers would dance reels and square dances as the fiddler called off the changes.

Churches and Schools

Dating back about one hundred years, or as far as I have any record, there were three churches or meeting houses, as they were called, in the town in which I lived, and three small societies, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Universalists. The first managed to have services the year round, and have done so up to the present time. The others had services but part of the time and have now passed out of existence.

Today the Congregationalists have a membership of 45 active and 12 absent members, with an average attendance of about 40, and a Sunday School of 35, children and adults.

My father said he received his education in a barn. The first school house built in our school district was a frame structure with one room. The entrance was on the south side, a large fireplace on the north and desks on the other two sides. The desks were made of boards long enough for three or four pupils. They consisted of a seat with a back on which a board was fastened to form a table or desk for the seat behind. The boys sat on one side of the room and the girls on the other. About eighty years ago a trunk stove was put in to take the place of the fireplace. About ten years later the schoolhouse was remodeled. The old desks, which had been badly cut up and were covered with the initials of most of the former pupils, were removed and new but similar ones put in, all on one side of the room. The pupils in the front seats nearly roasted while those in the back seats nearly froze. It was in this schoolhouse that I received my early education. When I was a small boy there were about sixty pupils in the district and twenty-two families with a like number of houses. The boys and girls went to school until they were twenty-one years old. It took a pretty good school master to take care of them. One man was carried out and never returned. At this writing, 1926, there are but seven families and no pupils of the original stock in the district. Seven of the original houses have been demolished and

five are vacant. Most of the remaining houses are being kept up in fairly good condition. There are but six of the original families there and they have no children. Four families of foreigners have moved in and have eighteen children. I was told that about the same condition prevail in the other school districts in the town. Instead of having a school in each district, the children, except those living in outlying districts, are taken to the central school, where there were in 1923 66 boys and 76 girls.

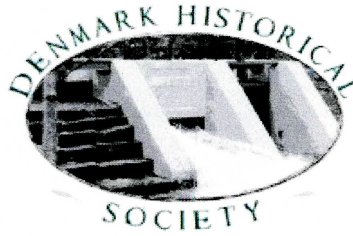
Academies are situated in some of the towns where boys and girls from the surrounding towns can fit themselves for college.

General Facts

The population of the town in 1850 was about 1200; in 1875, about 1070; in 1925 it had dropped to about 576. During the early years considerable business besides farming was done. There was a sawmill, a gristmill, a stave and shingle mill, a cabinet maker's shop, a carriage shop, three blacksmiths' shops and three stores, all doing a fair business. Besides these there were two shops making sale work (men's coats) and giving employment to quite a goodly number of women.

Now there is but one store and one blacksmith's shop. The mill and shop buildings are now used for other purposes. For several years past a corn shop canning upwards of 560,000 cans of sweet corn a season has furnished employment to a large number of men and women for four months in the year. Some of the farms are being carried on with profit. The owners are keeping their buildings up in good repair. They are painted white outside and enameled inside. The walls are well papered, and the houses contain bathrooms with hot and cold water, furnaces, electric ~~hank~~ lights, telephones, radio, electric washing machines and all the modern conveniences that are to be found in a city home. Almost everyone has an automobile and quite a few are able to spend a part of the winter in

Florida (17 last winter). On the other hand some of the families are just making a living, letting the farm grow up with bushes and timber, their buildings passing into decay with themselves. There are, however, no paupers. The Poor Farm that was carried on in former years has been sold and the money put toward building a concrete bridge over the brook at the "Corner". The quiet, restful place with its varied landscape of hills, mountains, brooks, ponds and lakes, make it an ideal place for city folk and there are camps where visitors spend the summer months. There are four camps for boys and four for girls which accommodate about 800 persons, including the instructors. A hotel accommodating 100 guests and other boarding places add a goodly number to the summer population. If it were not for these temporary visitors the town would be a dull place, and if it were not for the foreigners who are slowly moving in, the town was soon be depopulated. The foreigners who have bought farms are good citizens, their children do well in school and will help to keep the town alive.



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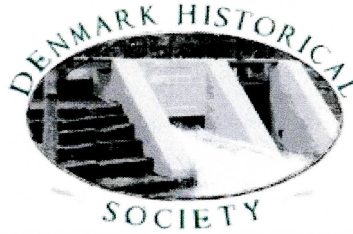
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