

TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE RECALLS A FAMILY PICNIC

April 22, 2003

Passing a rural home north of Lowville last week I was reminded of a bygone era. The foundation of the house was banked with bales of hay. This was a familiar scene when I was growing up.

It was a fall ritual for many homes at the time that had no central heating systems. Few had storm windows and none had the benefits of modern insulating techniques. Many homes, ours included, had sections of fencing that were linked together and filled with hardwood leaves.

They did little to warm the interior of our home. Many a morning we awoke to find a dusting of snow on the windowsills in our upstairs bedrooms. The old coal-fired Round Oak stove in the living room had little influence in our bedrooms. We were warm and cozy under our thick paper mill felt blankets.

There were five mills in our small town on the Oswego River. Heavy wool felts were used on the rolls and when the nap was worn off they had to be replaced. The old ones, dyed and hemmed, made beautiful warm blankets.

On really cold nights when the fire was banked to conserve fuel, the faucet in the kitchen sink was opened slightly to keep the water from freezing in the pipe.

Long before we were called for school, mom was up, and had opened the draft on the living room stove and started a fire in the cookstove. We hurried downstairs and huddled around the stove to dress.

Many of the everyday tasks we had to do in the old days are thankfully gone and forgotten today. Even the weekends were taken up with routine chores.

Saturday was chore day for kids. We split kindling wood for the week and churned the cream for butter. Then if we did not have to hoe sweet corn or potatoes we could attend to our own devices. My uncle would kill and dress a chicken for Sunday dinner.

We never knew what an allowance was. Any spending money we had was earned doing odd jobs and chores for others. I do not recall ever earning any folding money until I was old enough to get a regular summer job. I had a used Half-and-Half tobacco can for a bank. When I got it full of change, a quarter being the largest coin in the lot, I bought fishing tackle.

How many families today sit on the front porch after supper rocking and visiting until bedtime? The adults did every warm summer night while the kids played kick-the-can or some other game until dark.

Before bed we would have a snack such as bread and milk or popcorn and cider. If the cow was dry one of us kids would walk the half-mile or so to a dairy farm to get the milk in a two-quart milk pail. The going price was a dime. Milk was not the only scarce commodity when the cow was dry. Margarine or "oleo" as we called it, was the spread of choice instead of homemade butter.

A really big deal for the family was to get in my father's Whippet truck, drive nine miles to Fulton, and get a giant ice cream cone at Foster's Drug Store. Don't ask me how much it cost because dad always paid. All I can tell you was it had to be cheap!

One of my earliest recollections was of a Sunday picnic with dad, mom, and baby brother Cliff. Lady, our family horse, was the mode of travel pulling a two-seater buggy. We traveled to the outskirts on the far side of town across from the cemetery. There, under the shade of a huge Northern Spy apple tree on the Bill Butts farm, we had our picnic.

The return trip was through the cemetery to visit and tend my great grandmother's and baby Susie's graves. Today the rest of the family rests there - great grandfather, great uncle, grandmother, mom, dad, and Brother Cliff. Several other uncles, aunts and cousins are there with them.

On the few occasions I get back to visit them, I think once again of the first picnic I can recall. As I reflect back on it, it's hard for me, in light of where the world has come since then, to fully comprehend it ever happened that way.