

COLONIAL LIFE AND TIMES

Manners, Customs and Occupations of American Pioneers.

AN OLD THEME IN NEW HANDS

Notable Paper Prepared by a Poet of the Omaha Schools for the Daughters of the American Revolution.

"Colonial Manners and Customs" is the formal title of the following paper, prepared by Miss Violet Patton, a member of Eighth A class, Omaha View school, and was awarded the prize offered by the Daughters of the American Revolution for the best composition on the subject.

In our times we generally think and speak of our ancestors, the colonists, as slow and severe, and ridicule many of their old thoughts and seemingly useless customs; yet in our hearts we find much to admire in the sturdy men and brave women who first made this beloved country their home, and who, through their brave efforts, made it free.

The occupations of the colonists consisted chiefly of agricultural pursuits, although hunting and fishing were carried on to a great extent. There were few manufacturers, owing to the tyrannical laws made by the mother country, prohibiting them.

In New England, agriculture was carried on to a great extent, but with little profit, so hunting and fishing helped eke out a competence. The fishers constructed rude vessels from the timber in the forests, as far as Newfoundland, pursued their vocations. Much of the products thus gained was bartered to the West Indian traders in return for things which they, the New Englanders, needed.

On their farms they raised wheat, flax, corn, cattle and sheep. The goat, wife, spun the flax and wool into threads, and afterwards wove them into cloth, from which clothing for the entire family was made.

In the middle colonies farming and making flour were the principal staples of industry. A great deal of lumber was made and a profitable trade was established with the Indians along the frontier. Through Philadelphia, the middle colonies traded extensively with Europe and the West Indies.

Only the laws of England prevented the establishment of manufacturing. By its paper and iron were manufactured, regardless of the laws prohibiting manufacturing in America.

In the southern colonies, rice and tobacco were cultivated on large plantations, the labor being done by the slaves. In Georgia, the breeding of silkworms was carried on so profitably that in one year, 10,000 pounds of raw silk was produced. Tar, pitch and rosin, from the immense pine forests of Georgia and South Carolina, were exported to foreign lands.

Negro slaves and bond servants were kept in every one of the thirteen colonies. In New England they were kept principally as house servants; in New York they also helped to work the farms; in the south they did all of the work, their masters living like lords.

In Pennsylvania negro labor was not so great an account of indentured servants. These were composed partly of criminals, who had been offered the alternative of imprisonment and death, and partly of murderers generally served a term of fourteen years.

Other indentured servants were emigrants from Ireland and England, who were too poor to pay their passage to America and who crossed the Atlantic in exchange for bond servants for a certain number of years in payment of their passage. It was customary at the expiration of the person's term of servitude to give him two suits of clothing, a gun, a few tools and perhaps a hog or two.

Slavery was never carried on to a great extent in the north, because slave labor was unprofitable in that section of the country and sentiment was generally against it, but in the south it was carried on to a great extent, because slave labor was profitable and the people considered that slavery was right.

Travel was made in wagon, canoe, stage coach, on horseback or on the sloops which plied between the principal towns, that could be reached by water. The most common mode of traveling was on horseback. Sometimes a man and wife rode on one horse, the man sitting in the saddle and the woman sitting on a sort of cushion called a pillow, fastened behind the saddle. A small platform or a double stirrup, on which the woman rider might rest her feet, was hung from one side of the pillow. In the winter journeys were made in New York chiefly by the means of rude sleighs. The rich ladies being in cities made visits in sedan chairs.

Old-Time Homes.

The dwellings were at first very rude, consisting of a one or two-roomed house built from rough logs hewn from the surrounding forests. The chinks between the logs were filled with mortar, cork or clay to help keep out the snow, rain and wind.

The chimney was built on the outside of the house, sometimes consisting merely of sticks and branches of trees well daubed with mud or mortar, and sometimes of a cone put together by means of mortar. At the base of the chimney and opening into the room was a huge fireplace, with its huge crane and shining brass andirons. All of the cooking was done here, the kettles being hung on the crane over the fire. A large brick oven was built in one side of the fireplace, which, on a baking day, was heated by means of kindlings lighted and placed in the oven. When the kindling were burned the ash was carefully swept out of the oven and the things which required the most heat were then placed in it; when that baking was done the others followed in succession.

On the long winter evenings the family gathered, mother and daughters spinning or knitting, the son studying a few precious books in preparation for college, and the father smoking, reading the bible or telling some tale of adventure.

And for the winter freeze meet, Between the andirons a straddling feet, The mug of cider shimmered slow, With nuts and bread, the basket stood. With nuts and bread, the kitchen was supplied generally consisting of a table, cupboard and some chairs, stools or benches. In one corner stood a hand-saw by which the bread that mother and daughters spun were swept into cloth. The remaining articles, when not in use, stood near the lamp.

Feasting and Festivities.

The "keeping room" was kept for company and none of the children dared venture into its sacred precincts except for a little while when company came. The floor was sanded and laid out in a pattern, any bits of straw brought from England or Ireland was placed above the fireplace on the mantle or in a corner cupboard, the door of which was left open when company was expected. On the walls were hung the family portraits fondly cherished as mementos of the departed. On a stand or table a few precious volumes of literature were displayed. Among them were found: The bible, the psalter, "Pilgrim's Progress," "Saint's Rest," "Paradise Lost," "Lives of Mary" and "The Spectator."

There were several different sleeping ac-

commodations. In New York, the Dutch bed was a shelf fixed into a kind of closet built in the wall; on this shelf were piled two or three feather beds; the bed was reached by the means of a short ladder. Another kind of bed was the shalunk, a frame with a network of rope. One end of the frame was attached by strong hinges to the wall; to the other end were fixed strong wooden legs which, when the bed was not in use, were fitted into sockets in the frame, and the whole then raised and looked up against the wall.

In New England the beds were much like those of the present time, the trundle bed being the kind most used. The beds were generally in the "chambers" which was reached by means of a ladder. In the winter it was very cold. I wonder what some of us would think now-a-days if we had to sleep in a loft with the snow gently drifting through the cracks in the floor, and the rounds of the nails in the clapboards snapping and the wind roaring in the trees and whistling around the house to tell us to stammer!

Just sleep out on, as sleep will do. When winter sets in, the wind will be new; Rain and snow fall, the morning snow, Full in the summer-land of dreams. The sound of the summer streams, Low str of leaves and dip of oars, And lapsing waves on quiet shores.

Architecture gradually advanced, and houses of two and one-half stories were built of brick, stone or lumber. So imposing did the edifices appear to colonists that they were styled, "Mansions." The Dutch "mansions" were commonly built of stone or brick, with the gable end fronting the street and descending in regular steps from the summit of the roof to the eaves; the roof was covered with slats or pine shingles.

Colonial Schools. The colonial schools were far different from what they are now. The free school was started by the Dutch.

At first the children were taught at the home of some woman and repeated their lessons; or, while she went on with her work, the text-books were: The bible, the psalter, and the New England primer. The following couplets are taken from the primer:

In Adam's fall We sinned, and so did you; We sinned, and so did you; We sinned, and so did you; We sinned, and so did you.

After a while a regular school was held for about three months of the year. The establishment of the public school at Boston in 1635 was the outcome of the following:

"The 13th day of 24 month, 1635; Likewise be it then generally agreed upon by brother Philemon Dornont shall be entrusted to become schoolmaster for the teaching and nourishing of the children with us."

A law passed by the Massachusetts assembly in 1647 required every town of fifty families to maintain a school for reading and writing and every town of 100 families to maintain a grammar school to fit youths for Harvard university, which was established in 1636.

In Connecticut a school was established at New Haven in 1639 and Hartford in 1642. Yale was founded in 1700.

The establishment of schools in the south did not meet with success, owing to the opposition of the English governors. However, free schools were established in Maryland in 1696 and in South Carolina in 1712.

The common school house was built of logs. The benches and desks were hewn from rough timber. At one side was a huge fireplace and in front was the teacher's desk and stool.

"And within a corner standing, Is a dunce stool, plain and tall, And just near it, half-a-century old, Hangs the fool's cap on the wall."

The "rod" and fettle were used as punishment for nearly all misdemeanors, although some of the school teachers, and especially the women, were noted for their leniency toward the scholars' tongues for telling untruths and hold their fingers over burning coals for stealing. A constant hubbub of voices was ever going on, for the scholars studied the lessons aloud. The one who could down all of the other voices was considered the best scholar.

Religious Life.

The Puritans began to prepare for the Sabbath on Saturday. Kneading was halted and cooking to last until Monday. Saturday evening at sunset began the Sabbath restraint. The evening was passed in reading the bible, praying and discussing theology. On Sunday morning the family rose early and performed only the little necessary duties and then proceeded to prepare for church. No one stayed at home unless quite ill.

There were no church bells, but the people were called together by the beating of a drum or the ringing of a bell. Each group walked from their door as the sound fell on their listening ear, the men carrying guns, for the Indians would often treacherously attack a party going to or returning from church.

Upon reaching the church the men attacked

their arms and all entered. The pulpit would probably have attracted your attention to his high and venerable face, and his countenance. This was the minister's place and before him stood an hourglass filled with sand. When he begins to preach the minister turns the glass and expects every grain of sand to run through before he finishes his sermon.

Just below the pulpit are seated the ruling elders, facing the congregation, farther down, in the same position, are seated the deacons. Then came the congregation. Once every year they are seated according to rank. They do not sit in family groups, however, but the men sit on one side, the women on the other, and the children are assigned a place in the rear of the gallery or on the pulpit stairs. A man called the tithing-man or constable was appointed to keep the young folks quiet and the old folks awake. He carried a long wand or rod, on one extremity of which was fastened the foot and at the other the tail of a horse.

With the horse's tail and the head of the nodding man; but when a careworn man was betrayed into nodding she was gently tickled on her nose or forehead with the softer end.

The services began with a long prayer, followed by the reading and expounding of the scriptures. Instrumental music was utterly proscribed, as commanded by the banishment. "Take thou away from me the noise of thy viols; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols." The songs were imitations of the psalms written in meter. These the people sang to less than a dozen notes. On account of the scarcity of books, the songs were written by the minister and the elders; that is, he would read two lines then the people sang them; thus they proceeded to the end of the song. After singing came the sermon, which was dry theology and hard to understand. To this was sometimes added an exhortation; then there was another prayer and the benediction. The people then soberly marched to the front and deposited their offering in the money box held by one of the elders, and returned home in the order in which they came.

The afternoon was spent in reading such books as were fitting to the point in theology. All unseemly mirth was held in check until sunset, when the children were permitted to indulge in play until time to retire.

Frolics of the Pioneers.

We must not think that it was "all work and no play" with the colonists. There were many frolics, apple parings, corn husking and quiltings.

The Dutch were very fond of frolics. The feminine portion of the household were always busy for several days preceding such an event. They polished the heavy mahogany furniture, brass andirons and candlesticks till they shone. The drift brought from Holland was placed on the mantel above the fireplace in a conspicuous position and the newer dishes or any rare or valued articles were placed in the corner cupboard, the door of which was knowingly left open.

The good things which were prepared for the occasion would probably make a long list. There were cookies, crackers, cakes, pie, bread, butter, jellies, preserves, fish, turkey, chicken, cream, milk, all mingled together on the long tables set for the guests in the "keeping room" or large hall, and over all arose clouds of vapor from the motherly teapot.

The guests were fat old burghers and their little withered wives, young men and maidens. The old men were dressed in homespun small clothes, blue stockings and huge shoes with bright pewter or silver buckles. The dames wore close-crimped caps, long-waisted short gowns and half a dozen petticoats, with huge pockets on the outside, and scissors and pins tucked into the folds of their aprons. The girls wore ribbons or chains of brass or silver. The daughters were dressed in about the same manner, although one occasionally wore a straw hat, a fine ribbon or a white frock. The young men wore square-crowned hats, blue and red breeches and their hair curled, especially if they could procure an ekekin for that purpose, it being esteemed a great nourisher of the hair.

After eating their fill the guests were summoned to the central room or large hall by the sound of the fiddle in the hands of an old negro. Here they separated, the young folks dancing and the old folks forming in groups to discuss the news, read the tales of adventure, of which the narrator was generally the hero, or tales of ghosts and goblins who were said to haunt some locality in the neighborhood.

At a late hour the company dispersed, going home by the dim light of the setting moon, the superstitious ones occasionally

whispering and involuntarily glancing over their shoulders as they hastened past some haunted locality.

Dutch Customs.

It is interesting to notice that you only do we owe the introduction of public schools into our country to the Dutch, but also the custom of New Year's visiting, the annual visit of Santa Claus, the great egg of Easter, doughnuts, crullers, New Year's cookies and various other good things.

Not must we forget, as have that holiday draws near, the institution of Thanksgiving by the Puritans. In the year 1621 Governor Bradford set apart the last Thursday in November as a day of fasting and of thanksgiving to God for the bountiful crops He had given them. Accordingly the people and friendly Indians assembled on that day and sat down, giving thanks to God for His goodness.

The first printing press in the colonies was at Cambridge, Mass., in 1639. The first books published were collections of sermons. The first permanent newspaper, the Boston News Letter, was published in 1704. The first daily paper was the Federal Query, issued in 1792.

There was a postal system established, Benjamin Franklin being the postmaster general for the northern colonies. He and his assistants sailed up the coast, maturing the country in a chase, perfecting and maturing the plan. The journey which could now be made in five days then required five months.

The mail was carried from town to town by horse riders, at the rate of about thirty miles per day. Even the largest towns rarely had more than three mails per week. A newspaper was a rarity and the lucky person who possessed one was immediately surrounded and begged to read the news.

On the first Monday of each month a packet sailed from New York for Falmouth, England, with the mail and this was the only way of communicating by letter with the mother country.

Colonial Money.

When the Europeans settled the country, the Indians paid for articles received from each other in wampum. As the settlers commenced making this currency for themselves, its value decreased, and furs, buffalo, and the like gradually took its place. As the traders from the European countries and the West Indies would not take their pay in the most of this currency, all the gold, silver and copper coins were hoarded in to make any necessary purchases from the traders.

The country soon became very nearly drained of specie and in 1652 the general court of Massachusetts issued silver pieces of the value of six and twelve shillings. These were merely round pieces of silver, such great mounds as Washington and Franklin flourished, and makes us think that we would have been willing to endure the hardships of colonial life if only we might have participated in the noble struggle of our country for freedom or have been one of the signers of that famous document which declares that "all men are created equal" and that "these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states."

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