

Looking Back:
Essays on Country Life

Ann Sabo Warner

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This book is dedicated to the “old”
old times. I always listened to their
stories, and I hope someone will
listen to mine.

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PREFACE

One day I woke up and I was an old timer. The heroes of my youth, the men and women who served in World War II, were fast disappearing. It seemed that everybody else was younger than I was, and they listened with polite disbelief when I talked about the “Old Days”. For most of them, the Great Depression and World War II are as remote as the Middle Ages, and a time without technology is beyond their comprehension.

This collection of essays will certainly bring back memories for those who lived in those days, but it also is intended as a record of a way of life that is rapidly fading into history. The essays were written in the 1970’s (which already are the “old days”) when nostalgia was popular and many people were interested in conservation and alternative lifestyles in the country.

They are all recollections of life in Goshen, Massachusetts, which is celebrating its 225th anniversary in 2006. I hope I have captured the spirit of the times, when life was simple but never easy, and life’s deepest satisfaction came from hard work and using one’s wits to survive.

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INTRODUCTION

The places mentioned in this book still exist in Goshen, although they may have been altered in use and appearance.

The old farmhouse where I grew up is located at 78 West Street, and is now owned by my nephew, John Harry. The ten-acre lot, now grown over with houses and trees, where we had a huge garden and harvested hay, is just west of it, on the corner of Bissell Road. I picked blueberries as a child in the pasture (also grown over) across from the ten-acre lot, and as an adult behind the Webb house on Main Street, where I also fell off the load of hay. I still go there each summer to pick blackberries.

The cowshed beloved by porcupines still stands on Cape Street. (In the years since I wrote *“Varmints”*, Goshen has also become beloved by bears and an occasional moose!)

Miss Fannie and Miss Elvira were the legendary Boltwood sisters; Uncle George was John George Duennser; and Ozzie was Ozzie (I don’t think I ever knew his last name). The Gridleys and MacGregors were real people, but these are not their real names.

Much more background on the old families and homesteads of Goshen can be found in *The Bicentennial History of Goshen*.

KEEPING CLEAN

When a family's water supply came from a shallow well that frequently went dry in summer - when household water more often than not had to be carried from the well in buckets - when each family had at least two adults and six kids, and all the underwear, outerwear, toweling, and sheeting thereof to wash - how did you keep clean?

You all used the same water, whether it was the wash-up basin on the back porch, or the galvanized tub hauled out for baths. Nobody was too fussy about who got there first, except that one of the privileges of motherhood was to have one's own private wash-up or tub. Boys tried, sometimes successfully, to wiggle out of total immersion once a week, but no one was allowed at the supper table unless everything that showed was scrubbed and glowing.

You never, never played or worked in good clothes. School clothes had to last the week; church clothes sometimes for months; you even stretched your underwear as long as you could in winter. "Old" clothes were reworn if necessary until washday, which in winter might come each fortnight. In the meantime your mother brushed or sponged off the worst spots or aired things on the line to freshen them. In summer you swam a lot, always with a cake of Ivory, in any body of water that was deep enough to dog paddle without scraping your knees. You flew out into a summer rain-storm in an itchy woolen swimsuit to splash and scrub and

shampoo if the rain lasted long enough; and you took turns standing (presoaped) in a tub at the bottom of the stairs while your sisters poured water from a pitcher into a funnel on the end of a hose that terminated in a shower-head (a mail-order special) held in your hand.

And when water was short, you rushed to place every available pot, pan, tub, and pail under the eaves to catch precious rainwater. In winter you fetched bucket upon bucket of fresh, clean snow to melt in the washboiler on the stove. You brushed your hair a lot, you took sponge baths - soaping, rinsing and drying in patches from top to toe. You “saved” the dishes until the end of the day, doing up the whole batch in one wash pan and one rinse pan, recycling water from the canning kettle to the dishpan to the mop pail to the sweet peas growing beside the kitchen door.

It took some planning, but no one thought much of it - it was just what you did to keep clean in those days.

KEEPING WARM

An article by one of those energy crisis consultants telling how to cope with the rigors of a 60-degree night thermostat setting sent my sisters and me into gales of laughter. Sixty degrees!

If snow sifted in around our bedroom windows when we were kids (and it often did), we shook it off the quilts next morning, brushed it up, and returned it unmelted to the great outdoors. That was the longest we ever lingered upstairs.

We ran up to bed at night bundled in long underwear, flannel nighties, and old wool socks, with a hot sad-iron or brick wrapped in a towel for our feet, jumped in under mountains of blankets, quilts and puffs, and huddled in a tight little ball until body heat had warmed a small nest. Then we stretched out with great caution, pushing our foot-warmers down inch by inch with our toes, found a breathing hole for our noses, and went off to sleep.

In the morning we always awakened curled back up into a ball, for nothing was more nerve shattering than coming in contact with a now thoroughly chilled iron or brick. True courage got us out from under the covers, and we streaked to the kitchen where our day's clothing was warming on the wood box next to the big old stove. We didn't take long to dress either, for we all had the morning's visit to make to the outhouse. Some were outdoors, but the

fortunate had one adjoining the woodshed. This was a dubious luxury, since most woodsheds doubled as freezing lockers in the winter; solidly frozen chunks of fresh pork or beef swung from the rafters in ours for three months of the year.

The heated parts of our house always seemed toasty-warm, but I think it was largely a matter of contrast. Most of the old farm-houses had thin walls, no insulation, and no storm windows, and even though rags were stuffed in every possible crevice, cold air always got in. The foundations and cellar windows were banked from October to April with pine boughs, leaves, or hay weighted down with old boards, but it was a popular joke that this didn't keep the cold out as much as it kept the mice in. On sunny, still winter days the downstairs rooms were probably seventyish, but the rest of the time the abundance of chinks and cracks kept little islands of heat trapped around the stoves. If you wanted to sit, the chair was pulled up close, and even so there were frequent breaks to get up, turn around and warm your backside.

We glowed with health. Constant activity kept our blood racing. We never wasted a day indoors except for blizzards and school, and when darkness or storm finally brought us in, the kitchen was the center of our lives. We melted snow for baths and hair washing, and did the dishes in pans on the kitchen table because the sink drain was frozen solid. We brought the clothes in off the line and dissolved in fits of giggles as we danced with the board stiff union suits or bent crackling "snuggies" and bloomers over the wooden clothes rack behind the stove.

While we listened to the *Lone Ranger* or the *Green Hornet*, we baked cookies, or made fudge, popcorn balls and hot cocoa, and when every scrap was eaten the bricks were heated, morning clothes laid out, and the last visit paid to the woodshed. It sometimes took awhile to put our excitement to sleep, for the morrow was sure to be another glorious winter's day.

LIFE WITHOUT ELECTRICITY

Not so long ago, when I talked about growing up in a house without electricity, new acquaintances would suddenly become solicitous and help me to a chair, then spend the evening sneaking looks at my teeth and hair to see if they were still my own. Even people who have known me for years were convinced I was putting them on. But, now they listen with new interest, and, I like to think, a little respect. The days are gone when electricity was a cheap, inexhaustible miracle, and there's nothing like a good scare - a blackout, a healthy ice storm, or the monthly electric bill - to put things in perspective. Add to this the worry about dwindling fossil fuels, the dubious safety of nuclear power plants, and the renewed interest in seeking alternate sources of energy. Are you ready to listen, too? I thought you might be.

In defense of my hair, teeth and ego, I hasten to assure you I wasn't around in the gay nineties. We lived without electricity during the thirties and World War II; in fact, my parent's house wasn't wired until 1947. Those of you with rural origins, particularly if you're of my generation or older, won't find this too surprising, for there were many spots throughout the country side that waited a long time for electricity; power companies went where the most customers were first. Clustered farms and houses nearest the main lines had priority; we were in neither category, and it didn't really matter, because amongst our nearest neighbors, and ourselves there probably wasn't enough money to buy an

outlet. When the war came, we were touched by a fair amount of prosperity, like everyone else, but of course there was no material or manpower - so there we were, for a few more years.

Of all the various conveniences we couldn't use, we probably missed light bulbs the least. Memories of early childhood are pleasantly suffused with lamplight; winter suppers, the kitchen table laden with bowls and platters of steaming food, the room bathed in warm, yellow light, flickering to shadows in the corners; the barn at night, the lantern casting huge animal shadows on cobwebbed walls, the cows snuffling and chewing, their breaths warm and wet on my hand; the family gathered around the Aladdin lamp in the living-room to read, or do puzzles, or fight over radio programs. We were thrust together, whether we wanted to be or not; especially in winter, privacy went to the four winds. Where there was warmth and light everyone congregated; where it was cold and dark we slept, allowed a lamp to light our way, and no more. In daytime, the lamps stood on the kitchen shelf, filled with kerosene; wicks trimmed, chimneys polished with crumpled newspaper, insurance against the deepening dusk. To generations who have dwelt in homes lit up like city hall, it's difficult to explain the comfort of lamplight - it somehow helped sustain us through the long winter. Running out of kerosene would have been disaster akin to a modern blackout, but more so, for the alternative then would have been a handful of candles, then nothing.

Our only sophisticated form of entertainment was the battery radio one of my sisters bought with her first-earned money. Compared

to today's streamlined little gadgets, it was a monster of impressive size, a wooden table model filled with an assortment of glass tubes. The batteries to run it were also huge, and were housed in a sturdy compartmented pine cabinet. We were starved for contact with the outside world, and that radio brought the great events of the time to us more vividly than all the glossy embellishments of television newscasting. One of the first news bulletins we heard was of Hitler's march into Poland; Pearl Harbor pre-empted "*The Shadow*" one Sunday afternoon. What food the early dramas and soap operas were for active imaginations! What devoted fans we were of all the comedians who came to our living room on Sunday night! We never listened to anything "extra" or fiddled with the dial when my father was around. The radio went on and off by the clock; we named our program and that is what we listened to. His hand hovered near the knob, and when the Lone Ranger opened his mouth for the last HiHo, he was instantly silenced. That radio ran on batteries, and batteries cost money!

I think what we coveted most (I now my mother did!) was plumbing. If you're a country dweller, you are fully aware that without a pump, no water is magically going to flow from your pipes and faucets. There are ways of getting around this, of course; you can find a good well or spring on top of a hill nearby and let gravity do the work for you, or you can somehow get water into a holding tank built high enough to give you some pressure. One old trick was to collect rainwater in a cistern on legs (which was fine except in winter); another was to use a Delco generator or wind-

mill to pump water into a tank in the attic. Either system would supply modern conveniences, including an indoor toilet. Unless you've used an outhouse 365 days a year, of which 90 were frost-free if you were lucky, you may not fully appreciate the obsession to own a flush toilet. Some folks who really wanted one badly enough, had it installed anyway, and pumped water by hand into a bucket to flush it.

Our well was downhill from barn and house. It was open to the weather, and a hand pump would have frozen up in winter, so water was hauled in pails for everything - livestock, cooking, drinking, washing, and bathing. Water was heated in the teakettle (small jobs) or in the wash boiler (big jobs). We pulled the big galvanized washtub up by the stove on Saturday nights, taking turns, towels and clean nightclothes warming over the oven door, and that was rather nice, until one began to grow too big for the tub. (A classic story in our family, which my father swears is true but my mother swears is not, is that in her younger days, when she had started putting on a little weight, she got stuck in the tub in the middle of the kitchen floor one summer afternoon and had to wait there, in the cooling water, until my father came in from the fields and pulled her out. He says he almost had to bring in some more help; she always hastily changes the subject.) The tub was used once a week; no one volunteered to carry all that water between times. Occasionally rainwater could be collected or fresh snow melted; otherwise a basinful had to do.

My first memory of washday is of the square Maytag washer that was powered by a gasoline motor and gave off ghastly fumes. Because of this, and also because of the noise it made - you could hear it a mile away - it was used in the “backroom”, our equivalent of a breezeway, between the kitchen and the woodshed. Since the backroom in the dead of winter was just about the same temperature as outdoors, we then reverted to the Maytag’s predecessor - the old, galvanized tub and the washboard. Some people had hand-cranked wringers, but all our laundry in winter, including towels and sheets, was wrung by hand. Housewives of my mother’s generation were also great on boiling clothes, and a child returning from school of an afternoon never knew whether he would be greeted with the delicious smells of home-baked pies and bread, or the rather distinctive odor of cooking underwear. We may have skimped on water, but I challenge any modern housewife to produce clothes that were any cleaner; no germ dared survive the strong soap, fresh air and sunshine and that boiling.

Naturally we had no central heating, for without plumbing, hot water or steam, radiators could not be installed, and without electricity there was no forced hot air. One could install a wood or coal furnace in the cellar and let the heat rise through a central register, but most of us were content with woodstoves. My father was always up before dawn to stoke them, my mother always home to tend them. No worries about the random pipe freezing in bitter weather - no pipes! We did have a sink in the pantry, and the drain froze in winter, but we simply abandoned it, did the dishes in

pans on the back of the kitchen stove, and threw the water out the back-door. No particular fuss about wood - it was abundant, and my father could pile up three cords in a day for us, when he wasn't doing it for someone else.

In summer these days, the electric bill drops comfortably, and unless you are one to depend on an air-conditioner (and for my money, if you live in the country, you should be ashamed to own one), you can probably easily picture yourself pioneering without electricity. Why, all you'd need would be lamps or candles to prolong the summer dusk, and even limited baths and a privy would be no real hardship. But I'll bet you've got a refrigerator, and probably a freezer, too. Could you produce 99% of your own food for a family of seven, live five miles from the nearest market without a car, and manage from the first warming days of spring up through Indian summer? It takes some doing. My mother spent a prodigious amount of time and effort (1) keeping vast quantities of food from spoiling, and (2) finding some use for it even if it had started to spoil, e.g. sour milk. We did have a wooden icebox, and in July and August bought big chunks of ice from Buddy Richardson, who sawed them out of Hammond's Pond in winter and packed them in his icehouse. (I played with the Richardson children, and the icehouse was absolutely out of bounds - after all, some people liked chipped ice in their lemonade - so of course we sneaked into it whenever we could. What a grand sanctuary on a hot, summer day - cool and damp and smelling of fresh, moist sawdust)! But July and August was it - that was all the icehouse

held for family and neighbors. Everybody had special cool places where they tucked things away the rest of the time: a cellar, or a pantry on the north side of the house, or occasionally a spring-house nearby where butter and milk could be chilled in icy water. A bucket full or jars of homemade root beer, or drinks for the men in the hayfield, could be dropped down the well to cool in the heat of summer.

Everybody had pigs that happily disposed of all types of surpluses, spring through fall, and particularly milk. We were allowed to feed them sour milk (for those of you who may not be familiar with it, raw sour milk is a far cry from the awful smelly stuff you get if you let pasteurized milk sour) but nothing else that was in the least spoiled. My father would not feed his pigs garbage! Then, of course, the pigs, and sometimes a beef-critter, supplied us with meat through the winter. Butchering had to be artfully timed; if one was lucky, the fall chill held and ripened into winter at once. In that case, any meat that wasn't preserved with salt, spices, drying and smoking could be hung in the woodshed to freeze. If not - November or early December proved to be balmy - you ate it, day after day after day. A good long January thaw might be a disaster, for if it was warm enough to start thawing the meat, you started eating again, or the cook was forced to stew and can it all before it spoiled. Spring and summer were often meatless except for an occasional chicken killed on the spot, and the ubiquitous salt pork and milk gravy (equally unpopular variations - salt cod and milk gravy, dried beef and milk gravy, plain milk gravy). We

ate a surprising amount of fish, for in those days it was a simple matter to bring home dozens of bullheads, perch, punkin' seeds, or sweet little brook trout - all of which my mother rolled in cornmeal, and fried crisp and brown in bacon fat. When the suckers were running in spring, my father went every other night to spear them in the stream that fed the Upper Lake, and would bring home a burlap sack bulging with fat fish. They were loaded with bones, so we ate the delicate flesh with our fingers, picking them out as we went along. In the summer months, we had seafood at least once a week, even though we were a hundred miles from the sea. Buddy Richardson would meet the train in Northampton on a Friday morning, transfer the fish to a bed of crushed ice in his truck, and peddle it around town.

And milk - dear Lord, did we consume milk! There were the pigs, of course, and the barn cats, and any young calves that got their share, but we still ate puddings, custards, milk gravy, cottage cheese, cream, and butter - and washed everything down with draughts of cool milk from the pitcher. The piece de resistance, when ice was available, was a huge bucket of homemade ice cream (and it was made with cream, thick - rich and clotted) smothered with tiny, sweet wild strawberries. Modern science tells us now that this is very bad: look at the butterfat and the cholesterol - and we won't mention gorging on pork and beef in season. Yet both my parents saw their 90th year, without ever hearing about cholesterol. People power, I expect. Living without energy generated by some mechanical device means you darn well use

your own. And when you expend a lot of energy, neither the cholesterol, nor all that tension and stress that does folks in these days ever has much of a chance to build up.

Take the simple matter of cleaning a house. This was done with broom, mop, stiff brushes, and choice selections from the ragbag, and always involved a great deal of scrubbing, sweeping, airing and beating. I can't deny that a vacuum cleaner leaves a house slick and dustless, but in the process it makes a lot of whiney noise and give you a nasty backache. If, on the other hand, you have to haul the rugs out the back door, drag them over the clothesline, and whack the stuffing out of them, you feel good when you're finished. You're hungry, but it's guaranteed you'll burn up what you eat. You're tired, but too tired to be testy. Many a petty peeve had been reduced to nothing on a washboard; many a fit of temper taken out on a wet sheet, wringing it for the line. There is something deeply satisfying about doing household chores the old way. Nothing has done less for the soul than the automatic clothes dryer. How sad that generations of young housewives have never hung towels on a spring morning in the first warming rays of the sun, or draped a winter wash, half-frozen still, on a rack to dry, and waft the smell of Artic air throughout the house, or recovered a pair of long-johns in the melting April snow, blown halfway into the woods by some fierce winter gale.

I can't deny that it was a hard life, particularly for the women. They could expect little help from the men, who usually got up at five, tended the animals, hauled water, often walked at least part-

way to work, cut logs or cordwood all day, walked home, hauled water, split wood, tended the animals, and if it was summer, worked in the garden or hay-field until dark. Of course children could pitch in with the minor chores - filling wood boxes, weeding, turning and raking hay, picking berries and vegetables, shelling peas, churning butter. That only left the laundry (one full day's work, unless there were babies, or someone was sick); the ironing (one full day's work, and don't forget you had to keep the stove going full-blast in summer to heat the sad-irons); the mending (endless, whenever there was a chance to sit down, for even patches were patched); the cooking and baking (perpetual, to fill the stomachs of hard-working people, and use up all the perishable food); the canning and preserving (seasonal, but also governed by surpluses - my mother even canned meat and milk, and "put down" eggs in water glass); the cleaning (perpetual, with the dust of decades seeping up through the cracks in the floor, the grime of woodstoves, the muck tracked in by children, dogs and men who were always doing something messy). Oh, how I chuckle at the women's libbers who demand pay for all their hours of housework - my mother and her contemporaries would be millionaires thrice over!

Obviously women had little freedom, in the modern sense. But there's another kind of freedom in knowing you can do without, in becoming at least partially independent of that giant umbilical cord attached to the power line. It's not at all surprising to me that increasing numbers of people, scattered throughout rural areas, are

deliberately choosing a way of life that harks to the good old days, for we are all beginning to realize that becoming reasonably self-sufficient is one of the joys of living, if not one of its future necessities. Such a life is not for everyone; I'm not even sure it's for me - I'm not about to give up plumbing and refrigeration. But I can substitute wood for fuel oil whenever possible, and I can certainly brush my teeth, carve a roast, open a can, and wash dishes without mechanical assistance. I can clean reasonably well with a dust mop, broom and carpet sweeper. I can use the sun and wind to dry my clothes, and if I had a smaller house, or were building a new one, I would plan to use the sun to heat hot water, and as much of the house as possible. We are all faced with a frightening fact: in a short time we have come full cycle. It was only 60 years ago that many of our rural homes were finally equipped with electrical power and its promise of an easier way of life, and we are already discovering that producing enough power for everyone is fraught with overwhelming problems, and that the easier way of life is not, perhaps, what it was cracked up to be.

TRIBUTE TO AN OLD FRIEND

There was a big run on woodstoves last winter and a lot of new stove owners learned what the old Yankees knew for generations - namely, that a stove is kind of like a relative: it has a voracious appetite and the ability to perform magnificently, but does pretty much what it damn pleases. It can make you glow with warmth and affection, scare the stuffing out of you when it really gets going, and make you mad enough to swear and kick. It demands its share of tending; you not only have to feed it, you have to keep all its vents and pipes clear or you're in danger of setting the house on fire, polish and blacken its surfaces to keep it happy and free of rust, and clean up its leavings in the ash pit (sparse they may be, but they're dandy for sweetening garden soil or making soft soap).

We had a parlor stove, but it's the big black beast in the kitchen that brings back memories. Like the precious fire of the cave man, it was not allowed to out from October to May. Huge chunks were split especially to see it through the night, and indeed, the worst chills were kept at bay till morning - even though the milk often froze on the table across the room where it had been left in bowls for the cream to rise. Complete dependence on a woodstove was better than an alarm clock or a rooster; it required at least one early riser to stir the coals, add a little kindling, and work up a good blaze before breakfast. All the years we children were growing up, there was not one winter morning when we did not race downstairs from our icy bedrooms to find the kitchen stove

giving off its warmest glow, the coffee made, the teakettle already simmering, for one of our parents was always up before us to perform this service of love. There was a huge double boiler of oatmeal that had been made the night before and set toward the back of the stove to cook slowly to just the right flavor and consistency - a creamy masterpiece that was served with brown sugar and topped with milk. We toasted my mother's homemade bread on a wire rack over a stove-lid hole; it could easily become charcoal, but if the coals were just right it slowly turned golden and crunchy clear through, a challenge to the teeth.

Cooking on that stove was an adventure - you talked nicely to it, kept your fingers crossed and your wits about you. A woman who had reached true harmony with her stove could turn out the most incredible food ever eaten by man - succulent stews that stayed for hours just below the simmer, huge platters of crackling, steaming roast surrounded by heaps of tender garden vegetables, fat brown breads and puddings that steamed for hours in old coffee cans perched inside massive kettles, pies with juice and crust that made one weep with wonder.

Most of all I remember the bread - the heady, yeasty smell as it rose on the back of the stove, the marvelous aroma as it browned and crusted in the oven. There wasn't one of us who couldn't eat a whole loaf at a sitting. Bread baking provides a good example of the wily ways that became necessary if you had a wood stove. The weather had to be just right: if the atmosphere was too still, the fire sulked and smoldered and would not heat the oven enough; if it

was too windy, you dared not build a large fire because there was always the danger that all the tar and soot in the chimney would catch fire (a disaster that accounts for many an abandoned cellar hole). If the wind was agreeable and the fire burning nicely, and you decided to make bread or pies, you had to gamble on whether everything would be the same by the time you got them ready for the oven. Some ovens had a temperature gauge (ours didn't) but you didn't need it, anyway. You opened the door, stuck your arm in and waved it around, and if you could just feel the hairs on it prepare to curl up and singe, the oven was ready for bread. Cakes required an instant reddening of the forearm; for custards you could leave your arm in awhile before you smelled yourself cooking, and so on. It then required judicious feeding of wood and delicate adjustments of damper and draft to maintain the status quo until the baking was done.

Even while everything was cooking, the old stove had many other duties to perform. It heated water for all manner of washing, either in a reservoir attached to the back of the stove, or in kettles, pots, or wash boilers. It dried all our clothes, often after they were retrieved half frozen, from outdoors (such items as shirts and petticoats were hung on some kind of rack or line, but children's mittens and wool socks were draped over the shelves at the top of the stove). Our winter kitchen always smelled of steaming wool, or the sharp, clean ozone-freshness of thawing sheets and towels. No humidity problem then; even on rare occasions when all available clothing was dry, a simmering teakettle or stewpot was gently

steaming the air. The stove heated our sadirons, and bricks to wrap in towels to warm our feet at night; it boiled the croup kettle for the baby; the space under its sturdy legs was a nursery for an endless succession of newborn calves, piglets, kittens, puppies and baby chicks. It was the most superb foot-and-bottom warmer ever invented - to appreciate it, all you have to do is wishfully back up to the sporadic puffing of a modern hot-air register for the same purpose.

But no one has learned to know a woodstove unless he has been obligated to use it in the summer. For the same kindly, comforting beast that fought the winter chill was still there working mightily when it was ninety. The cooking, baking, ironing, and washing must go on. Even now, with my charcoal grill and efficient gas range that turns readily off and on, I have the habit of cooking furiously in the cool morning of a summer day so that the evening meal is 99 per cent complete by 9 a.m. Only when this was possible, and there was no other work for the stove to do, could it be allowed to rest so that the blessed breezes could again find their way into the kitchen. Otherwise everyone except the poor women who had to work there - flushed, sweating, damp hair straggling down over their cheeks shunned that room. And in the real heat of summer - the dog days - the kitchen was where they had to be, canning every berry, vegetable, and piece of fruit they could lay their hands on. This was a time before freezers, most folks didn't even have electricity, and the work put into canning would stagger the imagination of a modern efficiency expert: bushels of peas,

beans, squash; hundreds of ears of corn; crates of berries; baskets of tomatoes and peaches that had all ripened at the same time. We were a family of seven, by no means large in those days, and we bought nothing in the winter except staples - flour, sugar, salt, and the like. The rest was stored in the cellar - winter vegetables and apples in bins, pickles in crocks, and row after row of shelves bowed by the weight of hundreds of jars. No one had heard of a pressure canner, and all the jars had to be processed in a "hot-water bath", which was usually the same oval copper boiler that heated wash water, dyed clothes, boiled dirty linen, and tried out the lard. Some things like tomatoes and fruits processed quickly, but most vegetables had to be boiled for hours, with the fire in the old stove crackling merrily, the steam from the boiler pouring out into already laden air. The best approach was to pick, shuck, peel, shell, pit, and chop early in the day, without the services of the stove, and process on into the night when no one had to be in the kitchen. Canning time was like having a new baby in the house, with mother snatching a few hours of sleep between stove feedings and canner loads.

None of us will forget the night the shell beans blew up. They were prone to swell, and this must have been a particularly lively bunch. Around midnight the jars went off like bombs, one after the other. We scraped them off the ceiling, the walls, the furniture, the cat (who refused to come near the kitchen for the rest of the summer), and for weeks afterward - random beans, soggy and moldy, turned up here and there around the house. It was a

miserable mess, but we remember fondly - a country adventure hard to duplicate. As a passing compliment to the chief cook and bottle washer, although we ate our way through thousands of jars of home-canned fruit, vegetables, and meat, preserved by what is now considered a most primitive method, we were never sick or poisoned, nor did we suffer from any symptoms of malnutrition.

For children the kitchen stove was like a third parent; we dressed and undressed beside it, took our baths in the old washtub pulled into its halo of warmth, did our homework on frigid nights with the oven door open and our feet propped inside. We learned to cook early in life, because it was fun and we loved good food, and because on a winter day or rainy night it was the coziest thing to do. Naturally we specialized in confections - fudge, taffy, popcorn balls - but we could also turn out doughnuts, pies, and a creditable meal by the time we were ten. One of our ill-fated projects was making maple syrup. Most of our neighbors had sugarhouses for boiling down the sap, but we didn't, so naturally we hauled it into the house and did it on the kitchen stove, bucket after bucket after bucket. I've forgotten exactly how much sap it takes to make a gallon of syrup, but anyone who's tried it single-handed will testify that it's one hell of a lot. [It is. Forty gallons of sap to a single gallon of syrup. Ed.] We didn't know (and I guess our parents hadn't thought much about it) what boiling syrup would do to the house, but we found out. Those barrels of liquid that evaporated had to go somewhere, and they ended up dripping down the windowpanes, running down the walls, and turning the plaster

ceilings to mush. We didn't stop quite in time - we lost a lot of wallpaper that spring, and what was left was dandy for catching flies, for a little syrup itself somehow ended up in each droplet condensed. Syrup making was banished to the great outdoors forevermore - one less chore for the old stove.

Despite the current fuel shortages, it's unlikely that most people will become totally dependent on woodstoves again, or with so many modern alternatives, go back to cooking on the old kitchen ranges. But their cousins - the pot-bellied, the Franklins, the fat, squatting parlor stoves - seem to be finding homes without any trouble at all. For the right family, a stove still works it subtle ways: it demands that all comfortable chairs face it instead of the TV set; it mysteriously brings the monopoly sets, the jigsaw puzzles, the battered paperbacks out of storage; it dotes on conversation, popcorn, and lingering cups of coffee. It gives off rich and pungent smells that everyone tells us are pollution, but we can't help loving them all the same.

You don't have one yet? Well, what are you waiting for?

OTHER SUMMERS REVISITED

Last summer I went back to blueberry country. “It’s not the same. You won’t find much,” everyone says. But comfortable memories of juicy pie and warm blueberry cake crusted with sugar and cinnamon make me smile. Even a tiny fraction of the bounty I remember from childhood will satisfy me.

Swinging an old leather belt and two tomato juice cans with wire handles threaded through nail holes, I start down the steep hill toward the apple orchard and the old pasture beyond, finding traces here and there of a narrow path. There had always been a track kept open for logging, curved and precipitous enough to raise goose bumps on the neck of a bicycler, spine tingling in the winter when we negotiated it on a five-sled ripper. The hill was hayed by hand, the fathers and uncles scything the heavy grass on the slope, we children following behind to toss out the windrows to dry in the sun. Here was where one of the men walked away from a haycock one day with a huge blacksnake tangled in his pitchfork - over there the place where the load of hay and I went tumbling off the old farm truck. My job was to “tread the load,” and though I silently fumed because I was not yet allowed a pitchfork, I gained some insight of adult wisdom that day as I fought my way up out of the mountain of hay and chaff, dusty and unhurt, heroine of the moment. No hay here now, only a mass of golden-rod and milkweed, high as my waist, and the scythes hang rusty in the barn.

Then down through the orchard, but that is gone, too. For a time the apple trees, without care, still produced piles of red, golden, and russet fruit, and one could salvage enough for pie or sauce by peeling carefully and dissecting all evidence of worms. You never remembered which kind of apple grew on which tree, for my father and some of his friends who played at grafting had a sport with nature: a Baldwin might have a McIntosh branch, or a Russet a Gravenstein, or a tree might produce five varieties, the legacy of scions gathered here and there around the countryside. But the trees grew old, and years of storm - ice and wind - gradually tore off piece after piece, leaving wounds vulnerable to insect and fungus. Finally they were cut and hauled away, and now weeds and aspens crowd for their place, the hedgerow inside the stone-wall creeping inward more each year.

And there is the gateway to the old pasture, a space between tumbled stonewalls, and beyond, the field where we berried all the midsummer day, storing brimming pails in the shade of the pines until we had as much as we could carry back up the hill. We picnicked at noon on tomato sandwiches and ginger beer, and if it was hot enough, we sent the youngest children down through the dark pinewoods to fetch icy water from the spring with the Mason jars that had held the ginger beer.

I cannot find the field, nor for a moment even a blueberry bush. I think I am lost, my middle-aged memory has served me wrong, and I track right and left. Perhaps I have missed the gateway –mis-taken a tumbled-in portion of wall for it - but no. There is the path

that winds downhill through the thick pines to the spring. I wonder for a moment why it is still there, and realize that it is now part of a snowmobile trail. Everywhere else is thick new growth - junipers large enough for a helicopter pad, clumps of young healthy white pines, poplars twenty feet tall. I find the blueberry bushes. A few, sick and scraggly, still hold onto tiny spaces in the open, but most, reaching desperately for light, are almost as tall as the poplars. They have reached middle age too, their fruit sparse and nubby. I bend the bushes down as best I can, picking the berries one by one, recalling with a pang how such bushes would have been passed by with no more than a glance, while we scouted out the "good bushes," blue in the sun with their clustered weight.

This tangled wood seems unreal. I cannot remember a time when the blueberries were not there - in this pasture, in every pasture throughout the hill towns where I grew up. Like the sap of the maple, the berries were nature's gift to poor farmers, a crop that needed no planting or tending, a harvest that simply grew and ripened in the summer sun. Men like my father picked a crate or two in the long evenings to sell each week at the farmers' market. Picking gave us children our first pocket money; of course we picked at home for sport and our own consumption, but we could usually find a neighbor who would pay us ten cents a quart to pick his berries for him. We never liked picking for money; what would have been an outing in our own field became hard work - slow, tedious, and hot. No lazing in the shade during the noon heat, no half-full pails when we were tired, no snacking on the profits.

Many farmers, disgusted with us and lacking children of their own to pick, put up signs and let “city people” into their lots for so much a quart.

This was an act of daring, for city people let loose in the country were regarded as a great nuisance. They might scare the cows, or get lost, or start a forest fire, and there was always a strong suspicion that they would somehow get away with some free berries. Most of them did not, of course, but once in a while a bad bunch would come along and “rake” the bushes (which left no green berries to ripen) or sneak in under the barbed-wire fence and try to make off with berries because they “didn’t think they belonged to anyone.” The stories of such shocking behavior would be told around, and this would put all owners of blueberry lots on guard for at least five years thereafter. Some nailed up signs saying “Mad Bull,” whether there was one or not, but most just kept an eye on things. If a strange car appeared near a lot, it was under surveillance, and there were no scruples about searching it for blueberries. Occasionally some were found and immediately confiscated, and a slip of paper was left under the windshield announcing: “You can collect your berries for 15 cents [or whatever] a quart on my porch.” Some collected, some didn’t. One neighbor achieved great fame by outsmarting an entire family that had filled pails, buckets, and washtubs by raking his bushes one Sunday morning while he was at church. Greed did them in: they loaded the car and went back for more. So our friend, whose backcountry farm was on a dirt road four miles from town, simply

let the air out of all their tires. That story lasted more than five years.

I dreamed and wandered and picked for almost two hours, but headed back up the hill with less than a pie's worth. Something else was different, too; I had remembered the quiet - the lazy berrying naps of childhood, disturbed by the hum of a bee or an occasional birdcall. The bees and birds are still there; as a matter of fact many of the old timers wistfully blame the lack of berries on the latter, but they are really too wise not to know the real reasons. Just as the whoosh of trucks on the distant highway, the roar of jets, the cough-sputter of a chain saw have marred the quiet, the changing times have left the wild blueberries to struggle out their old age with no hope of renewal. The pastures are long abandoned; no cattle trample through, grazing the young shoots of encroaching shrubs and trees, adding random fertilizer with their droppings. No one needs to cut brush along the hedgerows to keep the fences clear, nor mow or burn the dried grass to keep it fresh and weed-free. Blueberries are now the cultivated kind - large, grape-like, too easy to pick, somehow tasteless. And the white pines and junipers have taken over the wild, as nature intended they should.

BLACKBERRY TIME

I was born in the old farmhouse one evening in later summer while my father was canning blackberries in the kitchen. By some stage metaphysics, this must account for a mid-August compulsion to grab whatever container comes to hand and go off on a black-berry hunt.

These days it takes some searching, but in my childhood it was only a short journey for any kind of berry - the woods, swamps, and fields were still wild and largely unaltered by man, and we knew exactly when and where to find each variety as it ripened for picking: the tiny wild strawberries, strong with sweetness, hidden in the tall grass, eaten hulls and all; the rich red raspberries that grew rank around all the outbuildings; the blueberries that hung in clusters from the pasture bushes; and, in the brambles around the swamp, the fat, beaded, late-ripening blackberries. Most picking, especially the wild strawberries, might be tedious - a day's project to fill a few small pails. But the blackberries bowed the canes with their spectacular abundance, and we took water pails when we went to pick, knowing we would return in record time with more than we could carry comfortably.

Blackberry picking was not for those of delicate nature, for blackberries never grew in any spot that could be regarded as even remotely convenient; one had to fight through acres of brush, slog through swamps, and be prepared to combat the most formidable

prickers ever invented by nature. No matter how hot and muggy it was, we always went fully clothed, our arms and legs well covered, but we still came home streaked with wounds and blood, shirt sleeves and pant legs torn, looking (and feeling) as though we had done battle with a Bengal tiger. But we were triumphant, for the spoils were most rewarding; we hauled home baskets, boxes, and pails brimming with black jewels.

And did we eat blackberries! The weak at heart squeezed out the stone-hard seeds and made rich, dark jelly, but real berry eaters never stopped to worry about them. (The old-timers claimed they never had to see a dentist to find holes in teeth - they just waited for blackberry season to see where the seeds would get stuck.) We gorged on blackberry sauce, blackberry cobbler, blackberry pie, and for breakfast - blackberries with sugar and thick, clotted cream.

But now, where does one find blackberries? They used to grow around the hedgerows and the swamps, for like most berries, they need a place in the open to swell and ripen. All the blackberry patches we used to know are gone; young trees have shaded them out of existence, or new growth has worked subtle changes in the soil, making it inhospitable for brambles. Once in a while they spring up in some newly abandoned field or around the edges of an old gravel bank, but it takes some traveling and some looking just to find enough for a pie.

Fortunately, my sister's old farm still has a blackberry patch - "cultivated" if you can call it that, for they were simply planted dozens of years ago and pretty much left to do what they would. I say "pretty much," because every generation in that family has tried to get rid of them. Not everyone is a devotee of blackberries - they find them too seeded and bland - and a blackberry patch gone wild is an unholy mess. This one caught hold at once (probably because it wasn't too far from the drainage of the old outhouse) and rapidly conquered the back yard, a mass of weeds and tangled canes creeping outward each year. The grandfather who planted them decided after the second year that he didn't want the damned things any more, and in a fit of determination scythed them to the ground one autumn day. The next spring they returned in triumph, strong, healthy, and so prolific that they were allowed to stay; after all, blackberries were food, and no one dared thwart such determined producers. As years went by, they straggled and spread, and the father, when he took over the farm, decided once more to get rid of the terrible eyesore. Again the scythe, and a huge brushfire of all the old canes - it was thought that the blackberry patch was done for this time, forever. But the next spring...A few years back, the son made one more half-hearted effort, knowing full well by then that nothing is dearer to a briar patch than a good trimming and a burn; the family's attempts at destruction had given the blackberries repeated renewal.

So, the canes are still there, rampant, unsightly, shining black with berries in August. That is where we all go to pick, and though it is

not much like the woods trips of years past, we have our
blackberries, at least for one more summer.

THE VARMINTS ARE BACK!

I grew up with varmints. For all of us who lived on small farms in the Berkshire foothills in the thirties, they were as much a part of life as woodstoves and home-canned peaches. Mostly varmints were anything on four feet that didn't belong on the farm, but pesky birds like crows sometimes qualified for the title. We did not include deer, for even though they could do a job on a vegetable garden, their size, beauty, and grace set them apart; in season they were hunted, otherwise fiercely protected. Our varmints were not very large, but sheer quantity made up for this. Foxes and weasels raided the chicken houses, coons and woodchucks stripped the gardens, and squirrels and mice feasted on the winter vegetables stored in the cellar. The bark of young trees was the specialty of the rabbits and porcupines, and many a struggling sapling, both in orchard and woods, was destroyed over the long winter. Skunks were smug and tame, and they grew fat by stealing eggs and helping themselves to the cat food on the back porch after dark.

Contrary to the belief that warm-blooded animals must sleep in winter, most varmints didn't. They rested, or holed up during bad weather, but the only ones that apparently stayed snug in their burrows until early spring were the chucks. The rest showed up from time to time all winter, and the smaller ones simply moved into the house as soon as the days shortened and the harvest began. Old houses always had all kinds of entrances and exits that only the

varmints could find, and spacious partitions and crawl spaces where they could set up housekeeping. Many a winter night we children went to sleep listening to squirrels and mice dance and quarrel in the half-attic over our room.

The mice in particular made themselves at home. They rummaged in the pantry drawers, stored sunflower seeds and gnawed apples in my father's hip boots, and had their babies in the living room cupboard. By Christmas-time, no one dared go stocking-foot on the drafty floors, for they were scattered with mousetraps, strategically placed to cover all possible mouse detours from hole to hole. The mice that eluded the traps by ignoring them or stealing the bait were poisoned as a last resort, not out of humanity, but because the corpses decayed in the partitions and stank until spring. Everything would have been simpler if my mother had allowed cats in the house, but it was a standing rule that they must live in the barn; this was understandable, since our cat population ranged regularly between twelve and thirty!

The mice were winter sport, but predators kept them under control during the other months of the year. The trouble with the other varmints was that they had few natural predators. Any animal that could possibly be dangerous to man had long since been eliminated from the hills - the wolves were exterminated, as were the mountain lions, and though an occasional wildcat would be brought in for bounty, not many were left. Some crucial mistakes were made in cleaning up the countryside; no one wanted snakes nesting around the farm buildings, and any bird remotely resemb-

ling a hawk was shot. For years, the farmers tended trap lines in the winter, making a little extra money on pelts of assorted varmints: beaver, otter, raccoon, and “mushrat”. But fox fur was choice, and thousands of “little reds” ended up draped around female throats. Having thus destroyed many of his allies, man became the only real enemy of the varmints, and much of his spare time was devoted to keeping them under control. Like the barn cats, dogs were a necessity; they were free to roam, and chased down quite a few smaller animals on their own. Despite the risk of injuring an innocent animal, traps were frequently set for various varmints.

I remember vividly the bonfire that cremated a huge mound of porcupines trapped and killed in our cornfield. To the modern mind this seems outrageous, but corn was our winter staple, and we could ill afford to lose it. Everyone owned guns, and they were loaded and ready should a varmint appear within range any hour of the day or night. When there was time, hunting was popular. Rabbit pie and squirrel stew were often on the menu, and there was usually at least one coon supper a year for friends and neighbors - sometimes for the whole town. I never had the courage to try coon meat (baked beans were supplied for the cowardly), but to this day it has many devotees. The old-timers tell of eating skunk, woodchuck, and porcupine, too, but presumably none of these gained any real popularity because of the difficulty of dressing and preparing the meat.

The trap lines, dogs, and hunting gradually took their toll, and over the years the varmints actually became scarce. Then progress came to the hills. A new generation came home from war ready to work in stores, factories, and offices and few were interested in the survival farms of boyhood. Milk cans and grain bags became collector's items, for the only farmers who could survive were those who could afford grain by the truckload and produce enough milk to fill a bulk tank. Larger farms adapted, but the many small ones slowly died out; some were sold to "summer people," and others were converted to suburban living. Most of the young families chose to build ranch-style homes, and the farm plots were broken up to accommodate them. For the varmints this was paradise. Open fields quickly grew up to brambles and second growth and provided them shelter they had never had before. Even the logging companies obliged by shearing off most of the large trees, leaving their tops and scraps in magnificent brush piles for the small animals. The farmers' shotguns were sold at auction or were hung for decoration, and dogs became house pets, carefully restrained to suit the atmosphere of the new country communities. Barns no longer swarmed with cats, and the rodents' feathered enemies - hawks and owls - could not reproduce with mammalian rapidity.

It took almost two decades for the animals to multiply enough to spill over into civilized territory. Then it became not at all unusual to capture the solemn ringed eyes of a coon in the headlights by the roadside at night, or to stop while a mother skunk paraded her

offspring over her own private crosswalk. A family of possums took up residence in a neighbor's tool shed and, though they caused little trouble, the neighbor was not enthralled when they invited a skunk to come visiting. Bold rabbits loped across lawns in broad daylight, looking for succulent plants in the flower borders, woodchucks reproduced happily in the weed-choked meadows, and porcupines invaded all the old farm buildings to gnaw contentedly on anything that bore a trace of salt. Even the bears - long gone - returned from some mysterious hiding place to forage on the few wild blueberries that had survived the natural succession in old pastures.

At first the reappearance of all the animals was a novelty, but they soon began to act like the varmints they were. Most people tried to raise their own vegetables, and the chucks, coons, and porcupines, guided by some half forgotten instinct, came to demolish them. Mice, squirrels, and rats gamboled through abandoned barns and, unmenaced by the once-ubiquitous barn cats became bold enough to move into the houses again. The beavers, not protected by legislation, returned in number to labor at their marvelous dams, creating many not-so-marvelous swamps in forest and farmland. Mountains of garbage, without pigs to consume it, were casually deposited in the old open town dumps, but landfill methods became quickly necessary when rats began to thrive and multiply.

Without the hunting and trapping skills of the old farmers, the new country people struggle to cope. Reluctantly, they are discovering some basic truths that any veteran Yankee could have told them in

the first place. (1) It's harder to set a mousetrap (and catch anything) than you think. (2) Rodents eat poison like candy. (3) You can sprinkle whatever you like on a garden - mothballs, talcum powder, or red pepper - the animals think it's delicious. (4) No fence ever stopped a hungry varmint. (5) If you work ten times harder than a beaver to put a chink in his dam, he will repair it in half the time. (6) If squirrels, chipmunks, or bats discover your attic, plan on at least nine years to get rid of them. (7) It's harder to shoot a varmint than you think.

One business executive I know climbed his steep roof with an old rifle before dawn to try to decrease his woodchuck crop a bit, and there his wife found him three hours later, unable to get back down until the white frost melted off the shingles. In the entire three hours, not a woodchuck had stirred, but the next day the rows of newly sprouted peas in the garden were chewed to the ground. One of his neighbors, who had bought and remodeled an old farmhouse, lay sleepless each night as a huge porcupine chewed noisily on the plank walls of the cowshed where he and his wife parked their cars. After trying to stalk his prey in his pajamas (no luck) and raising the sash to attempt a shot from the bedroom window (no luck), he stationed himself at the open window one night, gun cocked and ready. Hours went by in the freezing cold, but he stuck it out and was finally rewarded at three A.M. by the familiar scrape-scraw of porky's teeth. He couldn't really see the animal, but he knew exactly where the gnawed hole was and let off a shot. He was rewarded with a resounding

“whump.” Great jubilation woke the household, and they all decided to get a few hours’ sleep before attending to the corpse. They never did - what he’d shot was the left rear tire of the station wagon.

So goes the battle with the varmints, until this corner of New England falls prey to the bulldozers of the big developers. Hopefully that day is far in the future, and if this time man shows wisdom in dealing with the animals, a precarious balance may yet be restored that allows both to coexist in peace. For with abundant food and shelter, the predators will also return. Already I have seen the pricked ears of the foxes in the meadows and heard the call of the owls each moonlit night, and once more the hawks swoop and glide high in the sky on hot summer days. Although they sometimes give me the willies (and send some of our female guests into shock), I have left the snakes to nest in the tall grass and wander freely through the gardens. As in the old days, I often seethe and fume as I seek to outwit the animals that want to destroy the gardens and move into the house. But the children will smell the acrid perfume of the skunk on the night air, and learn the clever ways of the raccoon and beaver, and perhaps even see an otter or a porcupine. For a time the varmints are back, and I’m really glad they are.

HOW I MET MY FRIENDS THE GRIDLEYS

I maneuvered a free day a week or so ago, and as is my custom, journeyed eighty miles to northwestern Massachusetts to visit my friends the Gridleys. We have not always lived this far apart; at one time it was only twenty-eight miles, which, when one lives in the hills, is no great distance between good friends. But my almost-suburban neighbors here, where friends usually co-exist in physical proximity, expressed great awe. Twenty-eight miles? How on earth did you meet them?

It all began because of Miss Fannie's ductwork. Miss Fannie and her sister, Miss Elvira, had lived in my hometown as long as any one could remember, in a handsome colonial mansion that had once been the local tavern and stopover for stagecoaches traveling to Albany from Boston. (It gained local fame because of a tunnel - caved in long ago - that ran from its cellar to a well in the cemetery. The legend is that it was part of the underground route to Canada for escaped slaves, but more likely it was built by several local families who had a nice little counterfeiting ring going a while back). Although the sisters cherished their solitude, there was the problem of upkeep, and local workmen and artisans often did odd jobs for them, for which they were well paid. My father was one of these, and as a small child I sometimes went with him to take tea with Miss Fannie and Miss Elvira. We ate beet "juice" - each mouthful of raw, crushed beets chewed twenty-seven times - and drank our tea in the company of two life-size dolls and a

mammoth marmalade cat wearing a bib, and to this day I do not know how much this was to please a child, and how much it was lonely spinsters' custom. No matter - it is a delicious memory, and I tell you about it because it shows how generous two otherwise rather penurious ladies were with their help.

Some twenty years after our vegetarian tea parties - Miss Elvira meanwhile had passed away - Miss Fannie decided that central heating in her own quarters might be a comfort. Even though this did not involve the tavern itself, which was carefully preserved and shut off from the rest of the house, she would not risk ordinary workmen tramping about and possible tearing walls apart. She needed an artisan. Uncle George was that, having apprenticed as a metalworker as a youth in Germany, and since he had great appreciation for old houses, he agreed to help Miss Fannie with the heating project. This he did, and also insisted on repairing several antique lanterns for her. When the work was done, Miss Fannie presented him with a magnificent gift - a lovely old rosewood piano. A bachelor at the time Uncle George had no real use for a piano, but a gift graciously given is graciously accepted, and he took the piano home. Beautiful it was, but also useless. It had sat in an unheated part of the house for generations and had not been tuned, serviced, or played; mice and moths had chewed its felts, and its strings were a hopeless tangle. What to do with it?

Uncle George called Ozzie. As ageless as Miss Fannie herself, Ozzie was - and as far as I know, still is - the piano tuner of the hill towns. He steadfastly refuses to drive a car, and must be

fetcher. Everything must come to a standstill while he is working, for he will not tolerate any extraneous noise. But he was the piano man, and Uncle George fetched him. Ozzie spent some time inspecting the antique piano - trying the tuner's chords and ripples (to no avail), poking and prodding its innards. Finally, he summoned Uncle George for the verdict. "Can't tune this damned thing. It's a mess. You can take me home now."

"But what can I do with it?" Uncle George asked helplessly.

"Throw it away." Said Ozzie glumly, packing his tuning forks and snapping the case shut.

He obviously wanted some prodding. "There must be someone who can fix it."

"Well," Ozzie made a great show of deep thought. "One thing for sure, no tuner'll touch it. I did hear once of a young feller up in Heath who could do things like this - builds those little harpsichords, keeps a lot of spare parts. Don't know his name, though, or where he lives."

Uncle George had neither time nor inclination to pursue elusive piano repairmen. But the idea of someone making harpsichords in Heath intrigues us greatly, and we loved to explore the back-country - would Uncle George like us to track down this young feller? Why, yes, indeed he would. So one Sunday afternoon we checked the map and headed for Heath. There was a choice of directions, but up through Plainfield and Hawley seemed about right, and besides, we had never been over that road before.

Plainfield we knew, for it was one of our hill towns, familiar to us

from Sunday school conventions and other country social event. But towns' surrounding - Savoy and Hawley and Heath - were off the track, unexplored. It seemed that Hawley went on forever, and then, we discovered, so did East Hawley, but as we were descending a precipitous gravelly hill, we finally met someone: an old man in denim coveralls, toiling up towards us. Considering that we had met no living soul or vehicle for miles, we must have surprised him somewhat this, was no tourist route. But he simply nodded with Yankee cool when we stopped and asked him if this was the way to Heath.

"Yep," he allowed. "At least it used to be. Only met one man from Heath, years ago. Had a beard right down to the ground."

I thought he smiled a bit - but then again maybe not. He went on his way, and we on ours, wondering if, by the time we got there, our piano man would have a beard right down to the ground, too. But eventually we found Heath, across the tracks and the Mohawk Trail, and we wandered out through more backcountry, stopping from time to time when we found a house to inquire after the man who made harpsichords. This place had only silent, solemn children in the yard, that one some mean-looking dogs, another a weary, toil-worn housewife who looked at us blankly and shook her head. Finally we met a man on a bicycle, who thought for a moment and then directed us back the way we had come. "New people," he said, "only been here since I was a kid. "Don't know their names."

The piano man had mean-looking dogs, too (and a donkey and two sheep wandering loose), but when we drove in, he immediately came out to quiet them. Handsome (no beard), although not too youthful (but younger than Ozzie), he welcomed us. "Come in, I'm Macgregor," he said.

Thus began a score or more of magic Sunday afternoons shared with the Macgregors and their many friends of all ages, backgrounds, nationalities, and talents, but with one common love: music. The house was sparsely furnished, almost poor, but the parlor housed two grand pianos, and there musicians from miles around gathered with their instruments to practice, to improvise, but mostly just to play for the sheer joy of it. Macgregor's wife was a talented concert pianist; he himself played the clarinet. The repertoire leaned strongly to the baroque. The old farmhouse bore no resemblance to the elegant salons of Europe, but there was warmth, intimacy, and an abundance of talent, and I have never enjoyed chamber music as much before or since. Others like myself, with no particular talent but a willing ear, returned again and again, bringing some small token - something from the garden, some cheese, some wine. No one ever made a noticeable effort to prepare a meal, but everyone dined on Sunday night. We were so charmed, that first time, that we completely forgot the rosewood piano. It was not until the second or third visit that we obtained Macgregor's undivided attention, and then another month or two passed before he ventured to look at it. His studied opinion was that it belonged in a museum. He seemed reluctant to touch it,

probably because the time and effort would have taken him away from other more important things, and we did not press it. He much preferred to share with us all the treasures of the hills - an abandoned copper mine, a retired ambassador, an eccentric ship's captain.

One of these treasures turned out to be the Gridley's. We had a friend who aspired to write and wanted to meet a literary agent who was said to summer somewhere in the area. Naturally we asked Macgregor - did he know him? No, said Macgregor, but he knew a couple who raised chickens in the hills of Colrain who surely would. If we could arrange a free Saturday, he would take us there over the back roads, for we would never find it ourselves. Chicken farmers and literary agents seemed an unlikely combination, but we had ceased to be amazed by anyone Macgregor knew, or what they did, and we allowed ourselves to be taken that following Saturday. They proved, of course, to be most unusual chicken farmers. Twenty years before it became fashionable, they had left teaching jobs, bought a derelict farm far out on a dirt road, and set to work to live off the land. When Macgregor introduced us, they were doing this with flair. The farmhouse had been reclaimed and restored; the gardens were rich and lush from all that chicken manure, and the old barns were crammed with fat, productive leghorns. But the real life centered around timeless things - music, books, a devotion to rational thought, a love for man and nature unsullied by progress. There were twenty years

between our ages, nothing common in our backgrounds. But I had known them forever. We were friends and always would be.

That was a long time ago, and the friendship alone has lasted. The literary agent was forgotten; Miss Fannie and Uncle George are both gone; the rosewood piano rests in a museum. The Sunday afternoons at Macgregor's were numbered, too - people moved, personal circumstances changed - and like the holidays of childhood, they have become special times that can be recreated only in memory. So there's the story. You can call it a chain of loosely connected events, a wandering through a couple of summers long ago, or it could be some intricate pattern concocted by fate, if you believe in such things. I like to think of it as something that could happen in the New England hills, where provincialism and sophistication are such strange bedfellows. At any rate, that's how I met my friends the Gridleys.

THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS

These days everybody worries about children's rights, but that wasn't so when I was growing up. There wasn't much of a question about privileges, because you didn't have any until you earned them. And a kid always knew exactly where he stood - right at the bottom of the heap!

Oh, I don't mean that children weren't loved - indeed they were. At a time when few families could afford choice possessions, children were valued above all else. But when the subtle transition between babyhood and being a kid took place - watch out! A kid had to measure up; anybody who could finally walk steady on two feet was expected to work!

What a youngster could do, of course, depended on strength and ability, and since these qualities were sometimes a long time coming, kids drew jobs from the bottom of the list. A kid could gather eggs (because, though breakable, they weren't very heavy), and scatter chicken feed, and was expected to run the daily risk of having a chunk taken out of his leg by the resident rooster, who knew instinctively what his rights were. A kid could fill the wood-box, even if he could barely toddle, and it took him the better part of the day, carrying three or four sticks at a time. A kid could pick stones from freshly turned earth - seasonally, I grant you, but thanks to the generous glacier, a job that was guaranteed to be

there, year after year. A kid could weed; a father's hoe nipping at his tail, at a surprisingly early age.

No chore put a kid in his place better than haying. The value of hay was established early in life; it was animal food, and my father was very particular about what his animals ate. Grass was therefore guarded as closely as any garden crop. After it reached a certain height and was ready for harvest, you damn well stayed out of it, no matter the excuse. If it got trampled or flattened, it couldn't be mowed, and if it couldn't be mowed, it was wasted. Children were also forbidden to play in the haymow (a rule that was regularly broken when there was a barn-swallow's nest, or one of the numerous barn cats had produced a new batch of kittens) - ostensibly because of the ever-present threat of fire, but more to the point, I suspect, was his firm belief that you didn't wallow in the cows' food supply, and risk contaminating it with lost toys or other foreign objects.

On a small farm like ours, animals were kept for food and not for profit; as a result they deserved no unnecessary expenditures. We hayed without workhorses (certainly without tractors, though there were some around), our tools the time-honored scythe, pitchfork and wooden rake. My father mowed the house lot in batches (no kid ever touched a scythe, and that meant anybody under thirty), and each day when he went to work, he left explicit directions as to what was to be done. Spread out the windrows at ten - no earlier and no later - when the dew was off most of the grass. Turn the hay at two o'clock, and precisely at four-thirty, rake it up in

windrows again. If it looked like rain, cock it, but under no circumstances bring it anywhere near the barn - the exact state of dryness of loose hay was something only an expert could determine. (This all sounds a bit dramatic, but as a child I watched a barn burn to the ground because someone had been less than particular about the greenness of the hay before it went in). If the hay was ready, we put it in the barn before supper, my father carrying a cock at a time on the fork and pitching it up into the haymow through the high window. Only he was strong and experienced enough to do this, so kids had to rake scatterin's, and they had to do it properly. He could spot a stray tuft of hay a hundred yards away, and it was guaranteed we'd be sent back for it. If the hay didn't dry, or if it got rained on ("no damned good, cows won't eat it"- but they always did, when winter came and they were desperate enough") the detailed instructions were carefully repeated to us each morning, and the "kids" did as they were told, until it was finally all harvested.

Haying the ten-acre lot was a grand production. Usually a neighbor would mow and rake it with his team of horses, in return for a day's work from my father, who took his "vacation" to help care take of it and get it in. (One war year, when I was ten, and the only "kid" left at home, there was no one in town to hire, and my father and I together - he mowing, myself spreading, both of us turning and raking - harvested all that hay. Of course he did most of the work, and though I tumbled into bed each night barely alive, I was speechless with pride that I had been chosen to do this great task).

We had no hay wagon, but specifically for the hay, my father had hacksawed his Model-T in half and built a wooden rack that would hold a reasonably broad load. Nonetheless, it took many back-breaking hours of work before all the hay was gathered. We always mowed a rowan crop, and if the season was long enough, sometimes two. Dad would be scything the rowan on the house lot almost as soon as the last load came in from the ten-acre lot; doing everything by hand meant we literally hayed all summer.

After the war there was suddenly an abundance of help, new, adored brothers-in-law, and before long, assorted nieces and nephews, my father's grandchildren. As I grew to adulthood, it became a tradition for all or any of us who happened to be near home to help "grandpa" hay, and though times were changing rapidly, he was not - we did it as we always had, the hard way. The truck (eventually the Model-T was replaced by a secondhand Chevy pickup) was driven by one of the men - never a kid, even though he might have had a driver's license for several years - who would get out at each stop and help the other men pitch the hay onto the truck. Ideally there were enough men so that one could ride on the load and distribute the hay evenly; in a pinch a female or a big kid could do this, but only with constant heckling and advice. (It wasn't as easy as it looked, either - more than one load with a novice on top slid off a hill or a big bump.) Women and kids raked after, also with much heckling, and my father would grab a rake and do it himself if he thought things were being held up.

The full load went off to the barn, the younger kids left behind to cock up the next batch. The older kids got the nasty job of mowing (rhymes with cow-ing) away the hay. Most barns had a high loft up over the stables, and early crops of hay had to be pitched up there to make room in the main part of the barn. One man pitched the hay inside, another pitched it into the upper mow, and the kid or kids stationed there spread it around and pushed it back. The haymow in summer was stifling, the air hazy with chaff and dust, and after five minutes it was almost impossible to breathe. We emerged flushed brick red from the heat, close to asphyxiation, seeds and hay clinging to sweaty skin, inside clothing and shoes, itching unbearable. Since everybody else rested while we finished mowing away the hay, they were ready to go back to the lot at once, and we were expected to recover instantly in the baking sun.

Complain? Well, you'd better not, because you weren't going to get any sympathy. Everyone there had been the same route, and by unspoken agreement, once there was finally someone younger and less experienced than yourself available, you moved up a notch or so to the better jobs. And until you moved up, nobody was going to give you an easy time of it. "Huh", my father would say with disgust. "Call that raking hay, kid"? he'd snort, and then shuffle through it, making a big show of doing with his feet what some hapless youngster hadn't done satisfactorily with a pitchfork.

You'd think we'd have all given up, or at the very least seethed with resentment towards such an impossible taskmaster. But it didn't work that way. Mad - yes! There was hardly a day any one

of us worked for him that we didn't get mad (except for my brothers-in-law, who were men in their own right, and treated my father with easy tolerance), but according to the code of the day, you never talked mad to your elders, certainly not your father. So you had to take it out somewhere else. We all turned ourselves inside out to please him, and it kept us working at a fair pace for a good many years. Getting wise to his strategy was part of growing up; in the meantime, we developed pride in the work we could do, even though we were never lavished with praise. It became a good-natured contest to see when each of us would finally live up to his expectations. I remember well this landmark in my own life; it was one of the last times the family did the ten-acre lot together, and my nephew Rick was at the bottom of the totem pole that year. He was raking scatterin's, and so was I, and his grandfather was at him every minute. Finally there came the memorable moment: "For God's sake, kid, that's not how you rake! Look at how Anne does it!"

I was twenty-eight years old, and I didn't help with the hay again. Softened by sedentary living, I found to my horror that I could no longer expect my body to respond instantly to the demands of hard physical labor. I was sick with exhaustion at the end of the day. As usual, my father had chosen his moment well; he had finally acknowledged that I was no longer a kid, just at the time when I had to face the poignant truth that I would not be young forever.

ON SCYTHING

I was late getting home a few nights ago, for in the gathering dusk I stopped to watch a man with a scythe. He was a real mower - fewer than one out of a hundred are - and as worthy of my time as an evening at the ballet. The real mower and his scythe possess an ancient grace that is almost beyond description, a rhythmic bending, a steady swaying progression without any apparent motion of the feet. Like any gifted performance, it appears effortless, and seems as if the mower could go on into eternity without ever tiring.

Not so! Any novice who has visions of duplicating the apparently easy task of scythe mowing need only pick up one of the things; at once it becomes a cumbersome, oddly curved stick with a lethal and unmanageable shaft of steel on one end. It is a major accomplishment to keep from cutting one's foot, to say nothing of controlling it long enough to cut grass. Although you will occasionally see a youngster hacking away at some weeds by the roadside, the real art of scything is dying out. Yet no other tool was ever better adapted to New England - to its stone walls, swamps, ledges, and ubiquitous glacial garbage. A good man with a scythe could always keep the roadsides of the small towns clear, no matter how steep and rocky. And with a scythe, it was so easy to leave a bobolink's nest in the tall grass, or the tiny shoots of a new blueberry bush struggling to establish itself in an old pasture.

My father always mowed the house lot by hand, and even once our ten-acre lot, when the young men were off to war and no team of horses was available for hire. He was not a fulltime farmer, so this had to be done early in the morning when the grass was heavy with dew, or in the long summer evenings after a hard day's work. He often mowed by moonlight, while we children were in our beds, and we drifted off to sleep lulled by the soft swish of the blade and the snick of the whetstone renewing its razor-like edge. The whetstone was only a temporary sharpener; the scythe of the real mower had to be edged frequently on a grindstone - not the cute little pedaled things used by the grinder of knives and scissors, but a heavy, unwieldy contraption with a handle turned by a child. How we dreaded the job of turning the grindstone, for it was truly hard work - hot, sweaty, and messy, as the water lubricated it turned to muck and splashed in our faces. But we dared not complain, for we sensed the value of the scythe; it provided our animals with next winter's hay, kept the hedgerows trimmed, and was often for hire to clear where no machine could ever mow.

For those who possess the gift, scything is a passion. My father, at 82, still uses his much to the distress of his family. We scoured the countryside to replace his scythe blade when it became worn out (a quest matched in difficulty only by a search to replace his drop-seat union suits) because he would not be content without it. I recently found him resting, flushed and tired, after scything around the vegetable garden on a blistering summer's day. With great impatience I cried, "But, Dad, why do you do it"? A man of few

admitted pleasures, he gave me a small embarrassed smile.

“Because I love to mow,” he said.

NINETIETH WINTER

He always woke now when the sun was up, and it seemed strange. It took awhile, listening to morning sounds and easing familiar aches and cramps, to get over the terrible feeling that he had left things undone and taken a forbidden morning nap. It was almost as terrible a feeling; when he was full awake, to realize that there were no things to do - no job, nor chores, no animals in the barn anymore.

The animals - how he missed them! Thousands of days up before daybreak, any weather, to tend them, breaking the ice in the well with a crowbar to drop the bucket for water, or wading through grass thick with dew in the first false dawn of summer. Milking by lantern light, head propped against the cow's warm belly, steam of warm milk rising from the pail. It got to be too much - not so much the haying, had been born to do that - but fixing the fences and getting out to the barn in winter. Even after the cows were gone, he'd kept a calf each year, sort of as a pet, selling it always before the cold set in. Had to give that up, too.

Now even the barn was gone. For some years after there were no animals, he had cut and cured the hay and mowed it away - to keep the land clear. Most of it had gone to his grandson for mulch for his vegetables. A waste. Then the old barn needed fixing, and he couldn't stand the idea of its falling in, little by little, while he watched, so he gave it away. The Barruses came and took it apart

carefully, so as to use all the timbers and nails, and that was like the old days. For that barn had been built from lumber salvaged from the old house across from the church, long ago.

Up now, to get his breakfast. Let the old woman sleep. She hadn't been too good lately. Putter around and get the stoves going. Fire never went out anymore, both of them up and down at night. He worried about the wood. Not enough to get through the winter, probably, and would have to depend on someone else to cut more. Had to give up cutting his own wood, the doctor said, and now he wasn't even supposed to fill the wood box, but he did when no one was around. He boiled his egg and set it on a piece of toast, and while he ate his mind slipped back and he was young again, working in the woods. Lord, he could work! No chain saws then, just ax or one end of a crosscut saw. A loaf of bread made into sandwiches for noon - that's what it took to pile three cords a day, and then walk home. Good money, too, up to the depression. Then a man was lucky to make three dollars a day, doing what he could. Worked on the road then, cut ice one winter, all by hand. The father used to cut three-foot squares of ice working when he was working for William Packard; load 'em with a hoist. That was seventy, eighty years back. He thought a lot about his father and mother, more these days than his own family. Funny, though, someone showed him a picture of his mother and he didn't know her - taken when she was young. Couldn't remember anything but old. Huh - everybody would say the same thing about him now.

He put his dishes in the sink and settled into his chair in the dining room to watch the chickadees at the feeder. He liked the little cusses - used to eat out of his hand in the winter woods. Didn't like blue jays, though; he'd shot more than one of 'em, taking food from the little birds. Darn thieves. The old woman was up now, getting her breakfast, chattering. Most of the time he didn't listen - wasn't anything wrong with his hearing much - it's just his mind was someplace else. Took him where the rest of him wouldn't go anymore - huntin' bees, trapping mushrat, grafting apple trees in the warm spring sun. Took him over every inch of the countryside again, chasing coon, picking berries, logging for the Packard Boys. Lucky if he could make it to the mailbox now.

He worried about the hospital bill. Three months and it hadn't come - darn computers. His daughters said it was no problem - the government paid most of it anyway. But it was no way to do things. The old way was right. A man got a bill and he paid it. Not a bad way to measure a man - he paid his bills and took care of his own. Not that way anymore. He used to worry about dying, but he didn't much anymore. The cancer was the worst, and that had taken a lot of folks younger than him. He thought about his garden instead. Days were getting longer, not much frost in the ground this year. Might raise some cabbages, if the woodchucks didn't get 'em. Put in the wife's sweet peas anyway; start 'em in the house. Time to think about getting seeds, even if he never got 'em in the ground. Probably wouldn't be here come spring anyhow. Huh

might not even be here tomorrow morning. He closed his eyes and dozed in the sun, dreaming of the day he shot the five-point buck.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: My father, Michael Sabo, died that spring, April 1981. He just missed Goshen's 200th Anniversary, and his ninetieth birthday in October.