

School better than summer back in grandma's time

By Gordon B. Seavey

Back to school in the fall was a pleasure in my days, says Grandma Brown

Why? Boys and girls were glad the long hot summer was over and the heavy farm chores had lightened

Grandparents and in particular, great grandparents, many of whom worked on the family farm as children, recall their happiness upon returning to be with their classmates

How can a youngster survive today without a pool in the back yard or nearby, air conditioners, or a trip to Kimball's for a famous banana split? Bicycles were scarce three generations ago, and to get to Forge, Burge's Long-Sought-For or Nab ponds for a cooling dip meant hiking along dusty roads.

Yes sir, kids were glad to be back in school, even though they had to keep a proper eye on teacher Martha Grant's rat tan

Hunting for straying animals, pitching hay onto a high wagon with the hayseed falling on sweaty, itching bodies was no fun. It was worse stashing the new hay crop into the upper recesses of a hot, unventilated barn

Girls, too, were counted upon to assist in the haying process, or weed the garden, or milk the cows, feed the chickens, in addition to household chores. And remember that old, heavy cast iron lawn mower, with stray sticks clogging the reel? It took real sweat to push one over rough lawns

A point system

Sharing a school superintendent 50 years ago was common practice among small communities. Westford and Littleton, each with about 3,000 population, used Frank H. Hill, a dignified scholar, jointly. He devised a point system to encourage home life as well as school work. His program went something like this:

One credit was for building the fire in the morning in that iron range in the kitchen. There were no control buttons to be pushed as there are on today's electric or gas range. As a boy, one was always warned to bring in kindling and stove wood or wood came in through the shed

One point was given for milking a cow (who knows how to milk today, really an art?) Another point for retiring before 9 p.m.

(and miss that favorite TV program?) The window in the bedroom had to be opened to win that point. This was supposed to make better bodies and better athletes, but there was no soccer, football, tennis, etc. Even though the Academy could rarely field nine players to play Littleton or Chelmsford in baseball, the games usually went on, leaving right field uncovered

And if the student curried the family horse, that counted two points. Few owned autos, and if so, they were Model T's bought at Hartwell's in Littleton. He also ran a butcher wagon around town

There were three credits for wiping the dishes or having clean hands, face and nails for school. (Any problems here today?)

Starching dresses

If Amy, May or Rebecca (there were no Caitlins, Kristens, Danielle's, Sandras or Kellys to be called to tasks in those days) would wash, iron and starch her very own school clothes, a big 20 points. Local dry cleaning was non-existent.

Bathing in the tin tub on the kitchen floor or preparing an entire meal warranted six points

Boys wore knickers and long, black cotton socks, usually with a hole or two in the foot. Kids who wore corduroys were called "whistle breeches"

Putting a buck in the savings bank gave a thrifty person ten points. With no bank in town, this was a double chore, banking either in Lowell or Ayer. What's a dollar to a kid today?

There was the other side, too

Ten credits were deducted when school was skipped or one missed the horse drawn "barge" driven by such noted teamsters as George Burke, Jim Wilson, Fred Shugrue, George Kimball and others

Don't tell me, a graduate of the Academy in 1922, that school is boring and summer is all fun! However, I don't remember that the point system was a howling success. Even with all the advantages boys and girls have today, they equal kids of my time, perhaps better

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