

Smith: At the turn of the century we made our own fun

BY JUNE KENNEDY
CORRESPONDENT

Correspondent June Kennedy compiled this article from a series of interviews she did in the 1970s.

Vivian Sargent Smith
(1906-1990)

"In my childhood days in Graniteville during the teens [1914-1918], we made our own fun. We didn't have a lot of toys and things as the children do today — just a few dolls. I often played in the woods in back of the house. We often used acorns for cups and saucers, leaves for dishes and we carved little baskets out of horse chestnuts. There were some great quar-

ries up in back of us; we used to climb all over the ledges. We picked lots of wild strawberries, blueberries and wildflowers and knew a great many of the flowers and trees by name. I think we lived a little closer to nature than we have time for today.

"Always, just before May Basket time and Valentine making time, we'd go over to Mr. Wall's the wall-paperer in our village, and beg him to give us his old paper books. Sometimes, for fun, we'd make ice cream sodas out fortunately we didn't drink it!

"During the first World War, I remember a lot of the school children got together, and held a bazaar on my grandmother's front porch. I presume the mothers did most of the work. They made pies and cakes and all kids of goodies.

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But we contributed a great deal. We were learning to knit and made knit washcloths for the soldiers. I expect they were pretty shabby-looking things, but we were quite proud of them. They dressed us up in nurse's costumes and we stood behind the tables to help sell the things. It was quite an event for us.

"As far as chores, I really didn't have very many which was too bad. I do remember bringing in wood from the shed for the stove. We burned a wood stove which was nice and cozy. In the early days when I was very tiny, we probably didn't have running water because I vaguely recall some round pasteboard tubs that my mother told about bringing into the kitchen, filling with heated water for the Saturday night bath — which was taken in turn by each family member right in front of the toasty warm stove.

"We had a windmill in the backyard. When the wind blew, we had plenty of water. That was before we had town water. My mother told of filling buckets from a watering trough down at the foot of the hill and bringing it up to the house to wash clothes when the wind wasn't blowing. The only thing I remember about the trough was that it was a great hangout for me. I'd sit there by the hour waiting for a horse and buggy to come along and then watch the horse drink the water and talk to all the men as they went by. I don't think my family were too happy about that, but I did it.

"I remember there was a little store at the foot of our hill. Once a month, when it came time to pay the bill, I would love to go because when we did, the man would give us a whole bag full of candy. That

was the reward for paying the bill.

"I also remember how greatly embarrassed I was one day when I was at my grandmother's house [next door]. The butcher came. Grandmother wore great long black taffeta skirts with about 16 petticoats. When it came time to pay the butcher, she pulled up her outer skirt, and in the first petticoat was a pocket. In the pocket was a pocketbook. I thought that was not very nice, but perhaps that was an English custom. She had come over from England as a child.

"We did a lot of skating in those days. Practically every winter we skated on the Graniteville Mill Pond — except when we were cautioned about the current. Another place was the Blacksmith Pond over near the Graniteville Foundry. Still another spot for skating was up near the Catholic Church at the other end of town. That was fun because you could go up a little brook and wind around. We loved that. We did a lot of sliding too. They were happy days!"

Grace Fletcher (1900-1979)

"I think there is no place like a farm to bring up a family. My children were never bored, had something to do all the time — even if it wasn't always what they wanted to do. It wasn't all hard work. We took time to enjoy life, too. Every weekend in the hot weather the children wanted a picnic out in the pasture. We'd have hot dogs and sandwiches. They'd go for a swim or do a little fishing in Burge's Pond. Picking wild strawberries on Fletcher Hill was a favorite pastime. What beautiful jam it made! I think Walter Jr. had a reputation as a naturalist by the time he was 4 years old. He and the gang would pick a bushel of mushrooms from the oak trees and gather little pinky ones from the meadow. In the spring wild spinach or pigweed was plentiful. It's nicer than the spinach that you buy. We'd eat skunk cabbage too, when it was young and tender. And day lilies, did you know that if you cook the bottom of day lilies they taste good like turnips? Our children invented games to play. They'd go out back and dig tunnels and reinforce them with sand I suppose it's a wonder those tunnels didn't cave in. And too, they skated on Stony Brook and took their sleds up Fletcher Hill for a long fast slide down Depot Street.

"If I had a few moments in the afternoon I sat and read a book — mostly fiction or history. Every so often I would have the Grange come down and we'd have whist parties — sometimes 12 tables. Then we'd have dancing in the

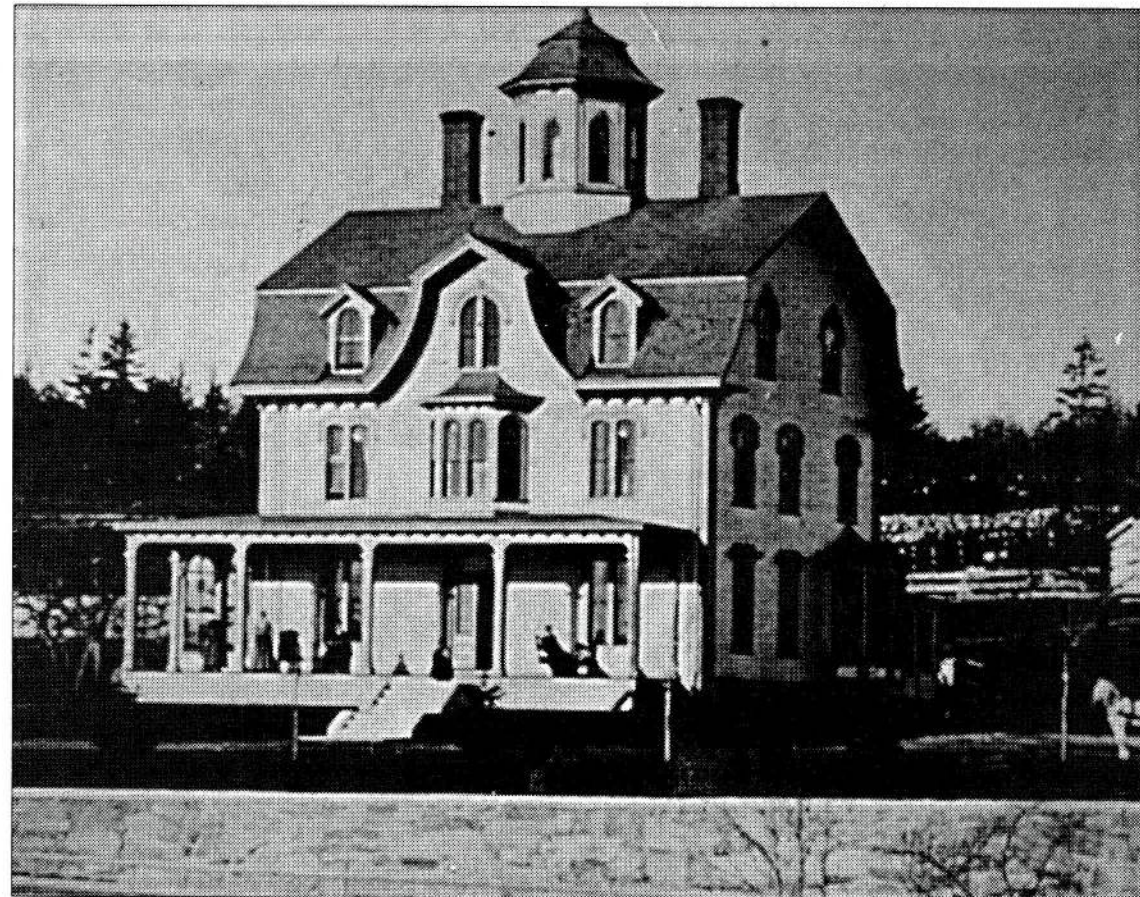


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During World War I, Vivian Sargent Smith and her school chums held a bazaar on her grandmother's porch to benefit the soldiers. The home, located on North Main Street, was built by Vivian's great-grandfather, Charles G. Sargent, then owner of the Sargent Mill, which was later known as Charles G. Sargent Sons.

kitchen. I think it was Henry Fletcher used to play the fiddle for us.

"During the Depression we were on rationing. We were allowed only so much. Living on a farm we were more fortunate than other people because we had our own meat supply and our own vegetables which I canned. In fact, I canned meat, too. Although they'd be 1,500 to 2,000 jars. We didn't have the lovely things they have today. I'd take an old dress and patch it or make the children things out of it! Bon Marche of Lowell and A.G. Pollard's always saved remnants of cloth for Mother Fletcher. Nothing was wasted! Things didn't come prettily packaged. Most of them came out of bins and boxes at the country store — a warm and welcome place to greet a neighbor. It was always so pleasant to chat with Ben and Freda Prescott, proprietors at the store. But there were so many things you couldn't get; people today can have anything they want if they have the money. In those days, if you had the money you still couldn't buy it because it wasn't there. But folks came through beautifully and the country came back."

Ruth Johnson (1900-1993)

"I remember my grandmother ironing a bed — putting the flat

or sad irons on the stove, and then ironing a bed before someone got into it so that it would be cozy. Soapstones were often wrapped in newspapers to warm the bed, too. I've heard of people putting salt in a bag and heating it to keep warm. Mostly sister and I would just cuddle up to each other and fall asleep."

George Perkins (1899-1978)

"We'd heat bricks in a fry pan and put them between the sheets to warm them. You'd get up in the morning and boy, I'm telling you, sometimes you'd see ice in the house. You had to have them windows open for fresh air!"

Carl Hornbrook

"In winter we all froze. It was cold, but no colds usually. I slept on the third floor on a tick and mattress. I'd dress downstairs and run like h*** to the tick.

"I remember passing by the Heywood home located on the triangular plot of land next to Westford Depot. The foundation was banked with sawdust, boughs, horse manure and leaves so as to keep out the cold."

Josephine Lamb (1903-1997)

"Around the doors and the windows at the old farmhouse were what we called sausages. They were either knitted or of old material, the length of the sill. Filled with sand, they would cut off any drafts from the ill-fitting doors and windows, and from the north side of the house. And to this day I'm still using some of them in spite of combination windows. They really are effective!"

Old wives tales

If a white pigeon lands on the chimney or rooftop, someone will die.

Sew on Sunday and the Devil will get you by Friday.

High beaver house, heavy snow; low beaver house, light snow.

Going to be a rainy, mild winter if the squirrels are not busy.

A bird flies at your window, there will be a death.

Used to say, have pneumonia three times you'd die.

Kids playing on the street, going to be a thunderstorm, it's true.

— This article is the seventh in the continuing Westford Recollections Millennium Series.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUNE KENNEDY

During the Depression the Fletcher family fared well. Living on the farm, the family had its own meat supply and raised vegetables. In this 1932 photo, Walter Fletcher Sr., his daughter Charlotte, and George Hardy Jr. are seen hoeing a potato patch.