

# LIFE AT HOME IN OLD NEW ENGLAND



BY  
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As I was putting the clothes in the washing machine and taking things out of the dryer to fold, it struck me that we have come a long way in how we live our lives. Thinking about everyday life in the 16th and 17th centuries, I came to the conclusion that the good Ole days were hard work. These were the times of metal bed warmers and candles to light the way or read by. I thought of this as I just flipped the switch on the way upstairs while carrying an armload of clothes. This began a stream of thought regarding the then and now of running a home and making sure the family was cared for in terms of food, child rearing, general cleaning and even entertainment.

A large part of a women's life is spent preparing food for her family. In colonial times there was no such thing as making out a grocery list as there was little food available to feed the family much less fill a grocery store. Indian corn was the main food supply. Because there was an abundance of corn, many colonists were spared from starvation. Indians taught them how to plant, grind and cook corn. Many recipe names were those of Native Americans. For example, succotash (sukquttah-hash) and hominy are taken directly from their original names. Corn was pounded in stone mortars until hand mills became available. Hand mills had circular stones which revolved in the mortar thus grinding the corn. Eventually, windmills were built to grind corn. Alice Morse Earle (*Customs And Fashions In Old New England*, first published, 1892, Heritage Books, Inc., 1992) writes of a recipe for corn which settlers could carry when traveling. Corn prepared this way was called nokick.

Indian corn parched in the hot ashes, the ashes being sifted from it, it is afterward beaten to powder and put into a long leatherne bag trussed at their back like a knapsacke, out of which they take thrice three spoonfulls a day.

Carried in this manner, the traveler could simply mix nokick with water and have a satisfying meal. Nokick was often referred to as journey-cake.

Cider was a popular drink of the day, perhaps because it was quick to ferment. It was made by first pounding apples by hand in a wooden mortar and then straining the pulp through a porous basket to give a finer mash. Children drank cider for breakfast and it was often served with dinner. John Adams often had hard cider before breakfast. Cider was given to workmen and farm hands during their work day. However, when the followers of temperance reform struck out against drinking cider, apple orchards were cut to the ground. Temperance proponents had overlooked the fact that apples could also be used as food.

Entertainment was hard to come by in colonial times; it seems as though many activities were forbidden. In the 1700s, card playing was the devils doing and cards were even referred to as the devil's picture books. Importing and selling playing cards were forbidden and anyone caught selling a pack of cards could be fined \$7.00, a significant sum. However, the fine was probably not imposed with any serious effort as cards were sold in large quantities and newspaper references indicate much card playing. Eventually, in Victorian times, more social participation for both adults and children was encouraged with many enjoying such things as skating and dinner gatherings. However, dancing was another story. Dancing was forbidden in Massachusetts taverns although upper society enjoyed elegant balls where dancing did occur. By 1791, dancing was considered proper and healthful.

Taking care of ill children was one major responsibility within the home. Men were often at sea and it was a mother's responsibility to know how to deal with her child's illness or discomfort. She needed to know how to prepare remedies prescribed for certain childhood illnesses such as rickets and how to help her baby through the discomforts of teething. It is a wonder that snails are not on the endangered species list as they were often an important ingredient in these old remedies. An external remedy for rickets, a skeletal malformation resulting from a lack of calcium and vitamin D in the diet, is taken from Earle's writing.

To anoint the Ricketed Childs Limbs and to recover it in short time, thought the child be so lame as to go upon crutches: Take a peck of Garden Snailles and bruise them, put them into a course Canvass bagg, and hang it up, and set a dish under to receive the liquor that droppeth from them, wherewith anoint the Childe in every Joynt which you perceive to be weak before the fire every morning and evening. This I have known make a Patient Childe that was extream weak to go alone using it only a week time.

There were remedies of senna, rhubarb and snails for worms and fits. Most mothers knew the pain of teething and would calm this by either scratching the gums with the bone of an Osprey or would apply a homemade salve.

Take the head of a Hare boyled a walm or two or roahed; and with the braine thereof mingle Honey and butter and therewith anoynt the Childes gums as often as you please.

Often a medical ornament, called an anodyne necklase, was placed on the child to help ward off illness. For teething pain, the necklace was made of fawn's teeth or wolf's fangs. Amber beads were worn to ward off croup.

Thoughts of child rearing, then as now, were written by supposed experts who described what was best for a child. One recommendation was to soak a child's feet in cold water in order to make their soles tough. Another was to give children thin soled shoes so that moisture would soak through, also to toughen their feet. Cold drinks were not advised for children and they were given slightly heated beer but only after they were old enough to eat brown bread with cheese.

Life at home was most certainly active, as families were large, with birth being what would seem a yearly event. Families with twenty-two children were not uncommon. One family was reported to have had twenty-six children, all of the same mother. Although many children were born, many died, leaving few to reach adulthood. With the presence of death and birth residing side by side within these families, children were often confused or depressed.

In Puritan days, reading scriptures consumed a major part of every day life and constituted a major source of learning. Often reminded of their sinful nature and need for prayer, children no doubt felt that they could never meet the demands put upon them by their parents or those imposed by what they must have perceived as a terrifying God. Earle writes of one four year old child's lesson received from her father.

I took my little daughter Katy into my Study and there I told my child That I am to Dy Shortly and Shee must, when I am Dead, Remember every Thing, that I now said unto her. I sett before her the sinful condition of her Nature and I charged her to pray in secret places every day. That God for the sake of Jesus Christ would give her a New Heart. I gave her to understand that when I am taken from her she must look to meet with more Humbling Afflictions than she does now she has a Tender Father to provide for her.

These lessons were a constant reminder to children of how they should behave.

Though times change and progress is made, it seems that competition in business stays the same. During the 1800s, people often traveled by stagecoach, paying the fare of \$3.00 to travel between Providence and Boston. Travelers complained bitterly about this exorbitant expense. Eventually a union was formed and a line of

rival coach companies offered a lower fare of \$2.20 for the trip. The original coach company, working to regain business, lowered their fare to just \$2.00. The rival coach line then lowered its fare again, this time to \$1.50. Price cutting continued with each company lowering the fare until the new coach line charged a mere \$0.50 to travel between Providence and Boston. As the owners of the original coach line watched and waited as people crowded onto their competition's coaches, they finally established the ultimate satisfactory fare. They advertised that their coach would leave everyday with the first people who filled the coach. The cost: Nothing!

Do not think that the competition ended there. The two companies continued their price war. First, one offered service with no charge and dinner included to which the second responded by offering service with no charge followed by dinner and wine at the journey's end. It wasn't long before someone took full advantage of this offer, traveling every day between Providence and Boston enjoying the ride, meal and wine. Soon more people caught on and did the same. It wasn't long before the two stagecoach companies came to an agreement that each would charge \$2.00 for the trip! Would this be ruled price fixing in today's environment?

Ruth M. Weissberger is author of *Reflections of Cape Cod: Stories of the People, Towns and Times*, Green Teal Publishing, 2003.