

Oakville and Trafalgar Township 30's 40's

Oakville and Trafalgar Township were on a human scale bound together by the Depression and WW2 with the need to work together, to play together. It was a life without TV, or computers, just the radio. Many housewives tuned in during a short afternoon break to listen to their "Soap". For many it was a busy life packed with chores, with visits by drop-ins passing by in their buggies, and the occasional church social, Sunday picnic, wedding and funeral.

Nature and concern about the weather dominated many farming conversations. Farming was fraught by a cold spring, a sudden frost, a wind that flattened wheat, the price of pigs, the milk board, and chicken thieves. The food on the table depended on these things and anxiety, heartbreak and stress had to be lived with.

Children were encouraged to live out of doors, bundled up with socks for mittens, often spending all morning in the snow, skating on the pond, roaming the spring woods to pick wild flowers, picking wild strawberries in far away fields, wading in streams, sliding down haymows and swinging on giant ropes hung from the rafters of the barn. Children helped to bring in hay by trampling it on top of the wagon as it was thrown up, forkful by forkful by hot sweaty bare-chested men. Children learned to milk cows, to pick eggs from pecky hens. Children were useful and expected to help.

Aside of communication with the world by the radio, more immediate was the party line. If you placed the receiver in a bowl, you could listen in as you did your work. Of course this meant people had to wait for their turn, often interrupting, sometimes quite rudely, for a turn. To phone you picked it up, cranked it a couple of time until operator answered and then asked for your number. Aunt Esther was "220 please".

Accidents happened, often serious, with Dr Soanes or Dr Wilkinson doing their best. There was no hospital, no medical insurance, no pensions, and no legal action. I was hit by a drunken taxi driver outside the high school while waiting for my ride home. I was lifted off the road and driven by the taxi driver to Dr Oaks. "NO, I want Dr. Soanes", but ended up having my cast put on by in the office of Dr. Oaks as he was the only one equipped to do it. Unfortunately they put it on over a cut, and gangrene was discovered 6 weeks later. Families paid the doctors, often in eggs or pork or pies but often in installments.

In those days there were many spinsters both in town and the country, future husbands killed in WW1. It was considered the duty of unmarried daughters to care for the aging parents as there were no old age homes or facilities to care for them. Old people simply "failed" and that was that. Neighbours would comment "She was a lovely corpse". Funerals were a very serious affair.

The war was announced by King George the V on the radio, a terrible day. Everyone who was able joined up and went off to be trained, and rationing came in: gasoline, butter, sugar as I remember. Life went on more or less as usual with newscasts at the Gregory Theatre just before the main feature. We bicycled to five miles to school and back unless the weather was bad and then we packed 3 deep into the Ford V 8, taking the neighbourhood children as well. War Bonds were a big investment and many of us spent Saturday at the dehydrating factory to send food to the troupes to earn money and do our bit. The army barracks was “across the Crick” in Oakville and wartime housing shot up nearby. RAF pilots in training were billeted with families and we had quite a selection of beautiful young men in blue on the farm, showing our Canada to them.

The country folk revolved around Postville, or “The Corner” where Annie and Will Dent sold ice cream for a nickel and had a gas pump. Leslie Bradley, an old army mate of my father’s who lost his thumb in WW1, ran the general store. He drove miles on the mail route, Carried bags of chicken feed, oats, and corn to customers. He had shelves of goods, sold staples, measured pounds of sugar, or rice, or potatoes from bags. If you couldn’t pay, he would write it in a book for later. One of his sons was part of the team that invented radar. Across the road was the old Inn where William Lyon Mackenzie had hidden, and it was run by a mechanic of genius who could fix just about everything.

Once a week the country people would go to town to shop at Lunau’s department store. Lace shoes measured by an X-ray machine were bought after a barefoot summer. Stores were people: Campbell’s grocery, the Miss Busby’s book shop, Nadine Angstrom’s wool shop, Byer’s drug store. They might visit with Lionel Reid, the manager of the Bank of Montreal or get their teeth fixed by Dr. Jebb. Ferrar’s Bakery was an ice cream treat with little round tables and wired chairs. Everyone knew everyone.

Town people lived a very different life. They had running water, milk delivered by horse and cart, and maids. There was policeman, Chief Kerr, who also tested drivers for licenses. Children walked to Central School, famous for its testy principal known for his strap, or Brantwood, ruled by a cranky Miss Brown, or the High School, the domain of Archie Archibald, a rotund, bald and fierce mathematician who offered peppermints to little children waiting for a ride home. Rev. Lovering, and Rev. Nichols were people of stature with resounding sermons in well-attended churches.

I was a country child with a foot in both places: music lessons with Mrs. Jago and dancing lessons with Mildred Wickson at the Chisholm ball room where Aunt Esther played for it. My parents spent a musical evening with Mrs. Jago and friends and she would play records on her very large gramophone. Mother, being tone deaf, would mend socks.

The Ladies Reading Union was another town event and each lady would write a paper. My father enjoyed writing and so my mother would last paper to be read as she went off to hospital to die. (By then there was a hospital and Blue Cross). Hazel Matthews, a family friend, was very busy researching Oakville and the Sixteen. She had been a Chisholm and lived with her sister, Dr. Juliet Chisholm, in the Custom’s House.

The New Year’s Even party in the Chisholm house was the big social event of the year.

The Oakville Club was a gathering place, especially for the RCYC. Badminton and Tennis, and parties were very different from the square dances at the township hall at #5 and the 7th Line. The wooden floor reputed to be the best in the country, and local violinists played all evening.

The dangerous Basket Factory, fed by the fruit growers in Oakville, and the fumey Langmuir's Paint factory were major employers. The lake attracted summer people and the waterfront was dotted with little piers. My parents used to swim to Bronte and back when they lived near Appleby, and had canoe parties. The Lakeshore East was known as Millionaire's mile and the children who came to school were a separate group who went to Hope's drug store for a soda after school, different from the "country kids" who biked home to help with the chores and the "Across the Crikkers" who returned to their modest homes.

It was a very different time and it just was. We were probably poor but we never thought about it. Hand me downs, make do's, hobos coming by for food, were just part of it. We rejoiced when the sun shone, we struggled home through the blizzards, we accepted the rain, and were exhilarated by our closeness to nature. We had such freedom; we had puppies and kittens, baby chicks, ponies, lots to do and in spite of the Depression and War time, grew up in a warm and wonderful world.