

THE WAY IT WAS
IN
BASKING RIDGE

A history by Margaret Elizabeth Carswell

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MEMOIRS OF MOTHER - 1980

Long ago, Basking Ridge was a little village completely surrounded by farms and moved at a much slower pace than today. In those days folks were never too busy to stop and visit with neighbors and friends and there was much concern -- one for another.

Seasons came and went, the winters longer and colder than today, with very heavy snows and much ice -- this type of weather pervaded the entire winter, and then, suddenly, spring arrived and earlier than it does today. When spring started, it continued, and not set back as it is these days with much cold weather and more snow and ice, making actual spring very late. Spring was a most beautiful time of the year in Basking Ridge. Fruit tree blossoms were in great profusion as well as many other flowering trees and shrubs. Traveling along the roads one could see the farmers ploughing the fields and sowing the grain.

What is today known as North and South Finley Avenue, was called Main Street, and not having a hard top, was extremely muddy when the thaws in the spring arrived -- the sidewalks were much the same and rubbers were worn over the shoes the entire spring. The street known today as Maple Avenue, was called Mud Street and some called it the Lower Road.

The social life of our small world centered around the church which, in my case, was Presbyterian. Here, we had anticipated events through the year. In our family of several children, the church activities came first. Sunday A. M. found us always ready with polished shoes and our Sunday clothes, and off we marched to Sunday School and then to church. After an early P.M. dinner, the P.M. was spent in reading Sunday books, or playing hymns on the piano, or just relaxing. In the evening, we attended Christian Endeavor and then late church, as it was called. Sunday was also a family visiting day, and there were few Sundays that we did not have aunts, uncles, or cousins for dinner added to our already large family.

One of our happy events was the Sunday School picnic held each summer. This picnic was held at Bockoven's Grove, which is a part of the present farm belonging to Mills Bockoven. This grove is located in the Environmental area. People traveled to the picnic in various conveyances and mostly by horse-drawn vehicles. We had a pony and the pony cart was gayly decorated with bunting and flags -- flags on the pony's harness -- and we children blowing the red and blue tin horns kept for this occasion. Long ropeswings were hung to branches of large trees -- see-saws were erected and long planks laid on horses for the dinner tables. There was a swimming hole and afternoon races of all kinds.

CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT

At Christmas time, we had the Sunday School Christmas Entertainment. A large platform was erected in the front of the sanctuary -- this was always done by Grandpa Allen. The smaller children sat on the platform and here they sang their Christmas songs and spoke their pieces. Santa Claus arrived bringing gifts to the younger children. There was always a gayly decorated Christmas tree also in front. Market baskets containing boxes of candy and oranges for the entire Sunday School, children and adults, one for each member of a class, were distributed along with gifts for the pupils and teachers. These events appear to have been so simple, yet they were so important and enjoyable to us children before the days of radios, televisions, and organized leisure programs had taken place.

CHILDREN'S DAY

Children's Day was always held the second Sunday of June and this was another church event which called for extra work but also most enjoyable. Several weeks ahead, the entire Sunday School, and this included a goodly number of adults as well as children of all ages, rehearsed special music for the occasion. Each Sunday this music was sung over and over again, and this continued until the second Sunday of June. The children rehearsed their memory work as well as their songs, and then the final performance was on Children's Day afternoon. The large platform, as it was called, was erected in front of the sanctuary. This extended out from the present platform in front of the pulpit. The pulpit was removed for the occasion and white cheesecloth was draped all around the platform and jardineres of daisies and buttercups trimmed the front of the platform as well as chains of daisies. At the end of the program, prizes of books were given for perfect attendance through the year.

CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOR

Christian Endeavor was held each Sunday evening, and once a month a Social and Business meeting was held at the various homes. We played a great variety of games and had a real good time followed by luscious refreshments. These socials were looked forward to with much anticipation. Dr. Bennett, our beloved minister, took part in these games, and I can still hear him ha-ha over some of our fun. These are a few of the activities we had in our Presbyterian church during this period. However, there was a Methodist, Catholic, and Episcopal church in our town, as well as the Presbyterian, and they also had their programs.

During this period, each family had their own pew in the sanctuary and a fee was paid for it. At this time, Bernardsville had no Presbyterian church. A horse-drawn vehicle called a "stage" brought a large group of people from Bernardsville each Sunday morning to church. Later this conveyance was changed to a bus. A congregational church was then built in Bernardsville and several of these families then attended this church. By this time many families had their own private cars which made it unnecessary to run a bus for transportation.

CHURCH SHEDS

To the rear of our church and below the cemetery were the "horse sheds" -- here the horses which had brought their masters and families to church, patiently waited until after the service to take them home again. This was a long building entirely open on the south side and divided into sections, in other words "stalls." The name of the family was placed on the front of the stall and a small fee paid for the use of them.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HOUSE

Where the church house now stands, was a very old grey house, surrounded by a picket fence, a brick walk leading to the door, a well on one side of the path, and a lovely old grandmother's flower garden on the other side. An elderly woman by the name of Mrs. Moore lived here.

ICE HOUSES

Of course, these days were long before the electric refrigerators were with us and due to the long and very cold winters, the ice on the ponds became very thick. This was cut in large squares and was delivered by teams of horses to those with ice houses. My family had an ice house and we had the use of ice all through the following summer to make ice cream and use in the many ways ice can be used. These ice houses were built partially under ground and partially above and entirely lined with brick. A large Dutch style door was built on the front and only the top part of the door opened at first to remove ice from top layers, then the lower doors opened later to remove lower layers.

I so well recall those summer weekends where mother made the ice cream of various flavors and the fun we had turning the freezer down in the outside cellar, and finally, when it was frozen hard, we all stood around waiting for the ^{dasher}ladle to come out. Then we all scooped the ice cream off the ladle with our teaspoons. This was the time the ice cream tasted best of all, and one of the happy, homely little pleasures we all enjoyed as children.

QUILTING PARTIES

Another interesting activity I recall were the quilting parties of which my mother had many. Through the winter the women would do the patchwork, as it was called. Small pieces of various colored material made in different designs and often quite intricate patterns, were pieced together. Then, a backing of solid-colored material to pick up a color in the design above was attached and with an interesting lining placed between. Wooden quilting frames were set up and the four corners rested on chairs. The quilt was placed on the frame in a square and attached to it -- the women sat in chairs placed on the two sides and as the quilting was completed, row by row, and very, very small stitches made forming a design, the quilt was gradually rolled on the frame until the two sides were completed. By that time, the quilt was finished, except for all four sides being finished off. The women had a real "chit-chat" all day while quilting, stopping at noon for a luscious dinner. Grandma Allen was an especially tremendous cook, and I recall some of the luscious food she did serve. Sometimes it required several days to complete a quilt, especially if it was extra large or very intricate in design, so that a special room was set aside for it. I remember only the finest sewers were included in these groups as they strived for perfection. In later years, they occasionally took orders for this quilting as a project for helping earn money for the church guild.

DRESSMAKERS

In those days, the majority of people went to the city by train to shop -- cars were few and therefore not convenient to go to Morristown to shop. Many of our clothes were made by our two maiden lady dressmakers and I can still see them going along the sidewalks swinging their little satchels containing their sewing equipment. We had six girls in our family, so there were many trips made to our house. I think the current events of the entire village were brought up to date on these visits.

STOREMAN

Several mornings a week a storeman, as he was called, either from the present Realty building on the corner of Oak Street and Finley Avenue, which was then the grocery store of Tobelman and Allen, or the P. C. Henry store, which is now the present hardware store, and the Brush grocery store, arrived in the kitchen and the women would give him a list of groceries needed. This list was written in a book and then tucked away in his pocket. In the afternoon, he would return with the order in his horse-drawn wagon, first pulling out the rope from the wagon with an attached heavy piece of iron and rope connected to the horse's halter. The iron was placed on the ground and prevented the horse from running away while alone.

TAXI SERVICE FROM THE RAILROAD STATION

On a summer's day one would occasionally hear the "clump-clump" of horse's hoofs coming slowly up the street -- this would likely be the "hack," as it was called, arriving from the railroad station, possibly bringing a passenger from the train. The faithful old horse would be drawing a two-seated surrey and always driven by the same man. This man earned his livelihood by driving this "hack" and the charge was 25¢ per passenger. He also brought the mail to town from the railroad station and delivered same to the post office.

THE FAMILY PHYSICIAN

In the house which is now the Gallaway Funeral Home, was the home of our renowned physician, Dr. Frederick Jones. Dr. Jones was known far and wide and was a most splendid physician. He went about covering many, many miles in a horse-drawn buggy and driven by another man -- later this buggy was changed to a car.

PUBLIC LIBRARY

I only remember the Public Library as being located in the center of town on Finley Avenue, the location prior to our present one on Maple Avenue. However, I have heard my parents say that the first library was in the building next to the firehouse which is now occupied by a real estate broker -- then moved to the center of the village to the building which is now occupied by the Village Luncheonette. From there it was moved to the building on the corner of Finley Avenue and Oak Street. Grandpa Allen was one of the first librarians and was given a gold pen in recognition of his services.

SIDEWALKS

About the year 1929, the present sidewalks were laid which was a decided improvement over the original ones of dirt. I do so well remember those very muddy sidewalks, especially in the spring time, and pushing a baby carriage through that mud.

When the sidewalks were built, each property owner paid for his sidewalk in front of his own property.

FIRE COMPANY

The fire company was, of course, a very important organization of the town. I believe it was organized about 1900. In the earlier days and before there were fire whistles to gather the men together to put out a fire, the church bell was used and rung at great rapidity which indicated a fire. Later a large iron ring was suspended on a frame and this was hammered on, making a very shrill gong which carried a great distance. Later the whistles were installed. Before the days of the trucks, the fire fighting equipment was drawn by horses.

FIREMEN'S CARNIVAL

The town's largest event was the annual Firemen's Carnival held the first weekend of August. The carnival was primarily to raise funds for the firemen's needs - however, it was also a social event and people from far and near came together, many staying for the entire weekend at the home of friends. The carnival was held on the Maple Avenue school grounds, which is now the Public Library. All we children saved our pennies for many weeks and had all plans made as to how each nickel ticket was to be spent. One of the highlights was a Merry-go-round, which was brought in each year by the same men and operated by them. I think most of our nickels landed at the Merry-go-round booth. There were all sorts of "wheels of fortune" and chances taken on souvenirs of all kinds, candy and everything one could name. A car was also raffled off. A very delicious chicken salad supper with home-made cakes, pies, etc., was held on the second floor of the school and prepared and served by the women of the town. This supper was widely known and for its unusual lusciousness, and people came from a distance to attend. This was all before the days of the electric refrigerators and the firemen carried all the ice up to the second floor to the ice refrigerators where the supper was prepared and served. In the evening, dancing was held in the firehouse across the street and accompanied by an orchestra. Early evening still movies were shown in the firehouse, mostly for the children, and the fire truck was used for the children to sit on while watching the movies.

ELECTRIC TRAINS

In the year 1930, the steam trains were replaced by the electric trains. This was quite an occasion and the school children paraded to the railroad station for the big event to see the new train. A ceremony was held and many townspeople took the first ride.

Some of the old steam trains which preceded the electric ones were really museum trains with red plush covered seats and occasionally a coal-burning stove in the front.

INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC

In the year ¹⁹¹⁸ 1918, the big Flu Epidemic hit the village. The hospitals were overly crowded and understaffed, so an emergency hospital was set up in the present parish house of the Bernardsville Episcopal Church. There the large auditorium was used as a hospital and managed by two retired, trained nurses of our town, namely, Miss Lillian Welch and Miss Margaret Anderson. The balance of the workers was made up of volunteers from Basking Ridge and Bernardsville. All schools and churches were closed at the time, so much of the help was obtained from school personnel and pupils as well as other townspeople. Many lives were taken in this area from the epidemic.

NEW JERSEY SAVINGS BANK

The building which is now occupied by the N. J. Savings Bank was, many years ago, occupied by two elderly sisters. One sister was a milliner and her shop was next door in what is now Dobbs Real Estate office, in the pretty little red house. Here she trimmed hats and sold all sorts of items such as laces, buttons, etc. I recall that when I was a very small child, she took such great pleasure in showing what was left of her little shop, to we children. The glass cases were still there and always covered with old newspapers. Later my aunt, Mrs. Robert Bishop, bought the larger house and to the rear of it had such a beautiful flower garden, arched grape arbor, etc. Now this is all completely gone and a large parking area has taken its place.

CORNER
~~CAREER~~ CUPBOARD

Where the ^{Corner}~~Career~~ Cupboard now stands, was an interesting old house surrounded by a white picket fence. There was a basement kitchen and a long porch across the front with tall French windows opening out on the porch.

Later this was converted into a candy and ice cream store and was used for this purpose until it was made into the present restaurant with living apartments on the second floor.

DAYTON'S HALL

Below the Presbyterian Church cemetery, on the left parking lot, stood a one-room large building called Dayton's Hall. Here such things as the school graduations, the annual firemen's minstrel show, and various other plays and social events were held.

FIRST NATIONAL STATE BANK

Where the present bank building now stands, was a most attractive, very large house dating back to the 1700's and at one time called the Union Hotel. There were two front porches on this house -- one on the first floor and the other on the second. These porches reached across the entire front of the house. There were eight large rooms downstairs and eight upstairs, and a fireplace in each room. In the rear of this lovely old home, was an old well, a woodhouse, grape arbors, flower and vegetable gardens, a barn and many old lilac bushes all about. A picket fence ran across the front. An aunt and uncle of mine lived in this house when I was a small child, and I have such fond memories of the good times we had as children visiting there.

I recall the old well being of great attraction to us as it was so very deep down in the earth and the old bucket attached to the long rope had so far to go as we turned the handle and unrolled the rope.

TOWNSHIP HALL

The area where the present Administration Building and Police Headquarters are located, used to be a dense woods, and each spring we children would go in groups to gather wild flowers while the boys would climb the trees and cut long strips of slippery elm from them. The slippery elm was considered by some to be most delightful to chew; however, we did not all agree on this.

Mr. Samuel Owen built the present building for his home in 1913. As a hobby, he operated a huge peach and apple orchards and this superb fruit was shipped to the city by train.

THE BUSY STORE

In what is now known as the Parks Building and next to the Store, was a candy and ice cream store. A long porch ran across the front and at the left end was the meat market which was continued there over the years.

It was at the Busy Store where we all, as children, spent our pennies for candy. Usually the licorice shoe strings were the biggest bargain, five long strings for a penny. On the porch of this store, on a clear day, was the peanut roaster, and once a week one could hear the loud whistle which came from this roaster and all then knew that fresh roasted peanuts were available.

In cool weather this would be the time when Grandpa Allen would suggest we have some molasses candy and one of us would be delegated to go down town and get a bag of freshly roasted peanuts.

At one time men's clothing, overcoats and shoes, were also sold in this store and I was talking to a gentleman one day who said he remembered buying a long wearing overcoat for \$5.00 Later the store was moved across the street to what is now the Corner Cupboard.

BLACKSMITH SHOPS

The present garage formerly owned by Howard Courtney and presently occupied by Mr. Tullo's garage on South Finley Avenue, is the building which was used as the blacksmith shop and owned and operated by Mr. Bornmann. Here we children spent many hours watching Mr. Bornmann shoe horses from the outlying farms.

There was also another blacksmith shop on North Finley Avenue and operated by a Mr. Moore. Here some of the men from that neighborhood gathered and discussed the news of the day. Both buildings are still standing.

CHRISTMAS EVE CAROL SING

In 1923 a very delightful custom was started which has been carried on over the years, and this is the Christmas Eve Carol Sing on the Green.

For the first two years, a very small organ was carried to the Green and a small group gathered around the organ and sang the old familiar carols. However, the little organ proved to be ineffective in the wind in leading the music, so the use of the organ was discontinued.

At this point my husband, John Carswell, became chairman of the Sing and continued as chairman for fifty years, until in 1975, he passed away. He got together a group of men with strong voices, and this helped considerably in leading the carols.

To John, this was a very important project, and each year several weeks prior to Christmas Eve, he began planning for it. He had hundreds of mimeographed sheets made listing the carols to be used, made an enormous number of phonecalls asking folks to be on the committee to broadcast the Carol Sing by telling all their neighbors and friends about it. He made it a special point to have on this committee representatives from each church in the community so that all churches were represented, making it a real community Carol Sing, and sent out hundreds of cards reminding people of the Sing. He contacted various band leaders in school and they in turn asked their more advanced students in the brass section to rehearse

and play at the Sing as a group on the Green.

Richard Booth conducted this group and proved to be a very able leader over the years. Many young people going on to college would be back with their brass instruments on Christmas Eve to again play in the group as well as other older citizens with instruments would participate.

This has become an established Carol Sing and has been so publicized over the years that folks from neighboring towns, far and near, attend. Many children, some only babies, are brought to this lovely occasion and it has always been a joy to see the children singing so happily around the lighted Christmas tree. We are told the memory of this happy occasion has a lasting effect on them -- some have attended all their lives.

The last Carol sung was always "Joy to the World" at which time the church bells of the town joined in, making it a most effective and joyous closing.

The Sing has never been canceled, and though usually we have had good weather on Christmas Eve, occasionally we have had snow storms and heavy rains, still the Sing went on.

This has become such a fine traditional community Christmas Carol Sing that we trust it may always continue.

ORGAN GRINDER AND RAG PICKER

I recall two interesting summer people and one was the Organ Grinder. On a clear summer's day our attention would be called to a very odd noise in the front of the house. Here we would discover a man attempting to sing and with a high screeching voice. A music box was attached to his neck with a wide strap -- he would be turning a handle and this in turn sent out music and always the same old tune. Attached to a thin narrow strap was a monkey dressed in a red jacket and a little hat. The monkey held a tin cup and in this we were supposed to drop our pennies. If we dropped in a nickel, that would bring on another tune. The man and his little monkey traveled from house to house, up and down the street, and am afraid the man never did become very prosperous for his efforts.

The Rag Picker, as he was called, traveled from house to house, collecting old clothing or rags, also pieces of scrap iron. These articles were weighed and the owner given small amounts of money for them. The Rag Picker was always in a horse-drawn open wagon and across the back, several large cow bells were suspended on a rope which was attached to a frame across the rear of the wagon. One could hear the melodious sound of those bells from afar as the horse plodded along.