

P. T. Barnum's Recollections

P. T. Barnum, the great showman, was born in Bethel, Connecticut in 1810. When he was seventy-one years old, he presented his native town with an eighteen-foot high bronze statue. The speech that he gave on that occasion was quite interesting and gives an excellent picture of life in a small Connecticut town in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The subject matter that he dealt with would not have been much different from what you would expect to find in this corner of Litchfield County at the time. Here is his speech:

“I have invariably cherished with the most affectionate remembrance the place of my birth, the old village meeting house, without steeple or bell, where in its square family pew I sweltered in summer and shivered through my Sunday school lessons in winter, and the old schoolhouse where the ferule, the birchen rod and rattan did active duty, and which I deserved and received a liberal share of. I am surprised to find that I can distinctly remember events that occurred before I was four years old.”

“I can see as if but yesterday our hard-working mothers hetcheling their flax, carding their tow [fiber of flax] and wool, spinning, reeling and weaving it into fabrics for bedding and clothing for all the family of both sexes. The same good mothers did the knitting, darning, mending, washing, ironing, cooking, soap and candle making, picking the geese, milked the cows, made butter and cheese and did many other things for the support of the family.

We babies of 1810, when at home, were dressed in tow frocks, and the garments of our elders were not much superior, except on Sunday, when they wore their ‘go to meeting clothes’ of homespun and linsey-woolsey.” [Linsey-woolsey is a mixture of coarsely woven linen and wool.]

“Rainwater was caught and used for washing, while that for drinking and cooking was drawn from wells with their ‘old oaken bucket’ and long poles and well sweeps.

Fire was kept over night by banking up the brands in ashes in the fireplace, and if it went out, one neighbor would visit another about daylight the next morning with a pair of tongs to borrow a coal of fire to kindle with. Our candles were tallow, homemade, with dark tow wicks. In summer nearly all retired to rest at early dark without lighting a candle except on extraordinary occasions. Homemade soft soap was used for washing hands, faces and everything else. The children in families of ordinary circumstances ate their meals on trenchers (wooden plates). As I grew older our family and others got an extravagant streak, discarded the trenchers and rose to the dignity of pewter plates and leaden spoons. Tin peddlers who traveled through the country with their wagons supplied these and other luxuries. Our food consisted chiefly of boiled and baked beans, bean porridge, coarse rye bread, applesauce, hasty pudding beaten in milk, of which we all had plenty. The elder portion of the family ate meat twice a day – had plenty of vegetables, fish of their own catching, and occasionally big clams, which were cheap in those days, and shad in their season.”

“Our dinners several times each week consisted of ‘pot luck,’ which was corned beef, salt pork and vegetables, all boiled together in the same big iron pot hanging from the crane, which was supplied with iron hooks and trammels and swung in and out of the huge fireplace. In the same pot with the salt pork, potatoes, turnips, parsnips, beets, carrots, cabbage and sometimes onions, was placed an Indian pudding, consisting of plain

Indian meal mixed with water, pretty thick, salted and poured into a home-made brown linen bag, which was tied at the top. When dinner was ready, the Indian pudding was *first* taken from the pot, slipped out of the bag and eaten with molasses. Then followed the 'pot luck'.

There were but few wagons or carriages in Bethel when I was a boy. Our grists of grain were taken to the mill in bags on horseback, and the women rode to church on Sundays and around the country on week days on horseback, usually on a cushion, called a pillion, fastened behind the saddle; the husband, father, brother or lover riding in front on the saddle. The country doctor visited his patients on horseback, carrying his saddlebags, containing camomile, jalap, Epsom salts, lancet and a turnkey, those being the principal aids in relieving the sick. Nearly every person, sick or well, was bled every spring."

"Teeth were pulled with a turnkey, and a dreadful instrument it was in looks, and terrible in execution.

I remember seeing my father and our neighbors put through military drill every day by Capt. Noah Ferry in 1814, for the war with Great Britain of 1812 – 1815."

"My uncles, aunts and others, when I was a child, often spoke about ravages of Indians from which their ancestors had suffered, and numbers of them remembered and described the burning of Danbury by the British in 1777.

When I was but ten years old, newspapers came only once a week. The man who brought us the week's papers came up from Norwalk, and drove through this section with newspapers for subscribers and pins and needles for customers. He was called Uncle Silliman. I can remember well his weekly visit through Bethel, and his queer cry. On coming to a house or village he would shout, 'News! News! The Lord reigns!' One time he passed our schoolhouse when a snowstorm was prevailing. He shouted: 'News! News! The Lord reigns – and snows a little.'"

"Everybody had barrels of cider in their cellars and drank cider-spirits called 'gumption.' Professors of religion and the clergy all drank liquor. They drank it in all the hat and comb shops, and the farmers had it at hay and harvest times. Every sort of excuse was made for being treated. A new journeyman must give a pint or quart of rum to pay his footing. If a man had a new coat he must 'sponge' it by treating. Even at funerals the clergy, mourners and friends drank liquor. At public vendues the auctioneer held a bottle of liquor in his hand and when bidding lagged he would cry, "a dram to the next bidder," the bid would be raised a cent, and the bidder would take his boldly and be the envy of most of the others."

"The public whipping post and imprisonment for debt both flourished in Bethel in my youthful days. Suicides were buried at crossroads. How blessed are we to live in a more charitable and enlightened age, to enjoy the comforts and conveniences of modern times, and to realize that the world is continually growing wiser and better.

And now, my friends, I take very great pleasure in presenting this fountain to the town and borough of Bethel as a small evidence of the love which I bear them and the respect which I feel for my successors, the present and future citizens of my native village."

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg