

Recollections of 1801

The following is an article taken from *The Mountain County Times* of Winsted with a publishing date of January 12, 1856. The topic is the recollections of a gentleman thinking back a half century, which means the date would have been 1801, now over two hundred years ago and counting.

“Northampton fifty-five years ago is a quite agreeable story, and we have selected for our column a few paragraphs that are of more than local interest, illustrating as they do, some of the customs prevalent in the Connecticut river towns at the commencement of the present century.

Food – Bean porridge (the coffee and the tea of our ancestors) had not wholly disappeared, but the use of tea, and of something unjustly suspected to be coffee, was general. Wheat bread, (white bread) only to be used on great occasions; in ‘fore handed families,’ the concluding slice was permitted from it. Rye bread, and especially rye and Indian, ‘brown bread,’ was on every table. Indian was employed in every form. It was told to us that one morning in school, the master ordered every boy that had eaten hasty pudding to rise, and all rose but one. When the solitary was questioned, he whimpered as an excuse for his oddity that ‘Dad could not get his grist, and so he had to make his meal of thickened milk.’”

Seating the Meeting House – “Seating the meeting house was an operation performed by the selectmen annually in December, and an awful time it used to be. It was the rule to get ‘the old folks’ in the ‘body pews,’ and the younger married ones in the wall pews. It is never a graceful process to grow old, and this open declaration of old age, by a change of seats, used to be *manfully* resisted, especially by the women. Besides, there was a well-understood conventional difference in the respectability of the seats. The second and third wall pews on each side of the pulpit were first in dignity; and from thence respectability tapered off. The front pews in the broad alley were given to the very old people, the high pews, and the front seats in the side galleries were devoted to the young fashionables. It is easy to see what a fruitful source of ‘small potato’ quarrels would arise from this usage. The regions of dignity and self-respect were exposed to sad invasions and not a year elapsed without some people taking it so hard as to spend their Sundays at home.

The seats were hung upon hinges, to be turned back when the people rose in prayer; when prayers were ended, they were dropped with a clatter resembling a volley of musketry. In those days it was not looked upon as unusual, but rather as a complementary mark of attention for the listeners to the sermon to relieve themselves from a long continued sedentary, somniferous position by rising and standing.

The Chorister – The congregation was proud of its music. The singing master was himself a curiosity and a study. It was the fashion to use a white cravat, in which was a pad, called a pudding, long enough to go around the neck, and quilted with wool. The master had a tall, portly figure, and a very long neck; his dress was of bright colors, a vest of sulphur yellow; his cravat absorbed yards of muslin, and a budding of most portentous dimensions. It was a sight to see him lead the tune. He would first handle his ‘tootin weapon,’ (it was before the days of tuning forks), he breathed through it a tender note, to which he listened with an expression of intense anguish, then dropping his head, he performed an unintelligible solo, which sounded like a distant caterwaul ‘to get the

pitch.’ Then rising gracefully in the center of the gallery, with a countenance radiant of happiness, he poured forth the key note with exemplary vigor, and stretching his arm to its fullest extent, started on the tune, in full cry, rising and sinking on his toes with each bar, and beating tune with knee, arm, neck and hand; but probably from some defect in his throat, seeming to choke and swallow at every other syllable, bearing no small resemblance to a hen swallowing stolen hot hasty pudding.

Convivial Habits – A custom of long continuance had not become wholly disused in 1800, by men of all occupations; farmers, mechanics and others used to quit work on Saturday afternoons at three o’clock, ‘to go down town,’ do the errands and other amusements. – Drinking was not forgotten; it was never forgotten at any meeting of friends, except on Sundays; at the taverns, for six days of every week in the year, the toddy stick was never dry, and while pies were kept in the barroom, the flip iron was never suffered to cool. It is a wonder that any sobriety was left, as no restraints seemed to exist from prudence, morals or fashions.

Ministerial Toddy – The clergy were not behind the society in yielding to the indulgence, and gave occasion to the name of ministerial toddy to one of the tipplers, by the following adventure: The ministers from the river were crossing the bleak hills of Berkshire, one very cold day, and stopped at a tavern to warm and get something comfortable. Calling for half a ‘mug of toddy,’ they differed in opinion whether it should be made of rum or brandy, and finally compromised ‘upon half and half.’ The innkeeper heard the discussion, but mistook the direction, and produced the article, composed of half of each, but without water, and disguised by being made very sweet with molasses. The simple-hearted good men, unsuspectingly took a long, hearty breathless pull at the deceitful liquor, and returning to the sleigh and setting their faces against the cutting north-wester, resumed their