**Local Society in 1800**

An article appeared in the January 12, 1856 *Mountain County Herald*, published in West Winsted that had been written by an elderly gentleman who set down on paper his recollections of fifty-five years previous. The editor of the paper felt that it was well written, and described life as it was experienced locally around the beginning of the nineteenth century, then but fifty-five years before, but to us, more than two hundred years ago.

**Food.** Bean porridge (the coffee and 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") was only to be used on great occasions in "fore handed families". 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 set "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 uncivil, 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 has 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 time with knee, body, arm, neck and hand.

**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 of the week, and spend the hour in athletic 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 bar room, 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.

[A flip iron was similar to a fireplace poker. It was heated red hot, then plunged into the flip, a concoction of beer and brown sugar, fortified with rum or brandy. The heat caramelized the brown sugar, giving a distinct flavor to the drink.]

**Ministerial Toddy.** The clergy were not behind the society in yielding to the indulgence, and gave occasion to the name of the ministerial toddy to one of the tipplers, by the following adventure. The ministers from the river were crossing the bleak Litchfield Hills 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 northwester, resumed their conversation by the inquiry *"Brother, has not the weather moderated a good deal?'*

**Pranks.** Tricks, jokes, ridiculous stories, mystification, and every kind of laughable deception, were an everyday occurrence. Here are two examples of what they used to get up on each other. A tailor and a hatter, both respectable, lived near each other in "Comfort Street". The story ran that the tailor found a bumblebee's nest, and told some boys what fine fun they might have by fighting it with their jackets. The hatter, seeing them thus employed, ran to them in great haste, and putting on a most ferocious countenance, exclaimed: "You young dogs, what would your mothers say if they knew you abused your clothes so; put on your jackets this instant and use your hats."

The leading blacksmith of the town, a man of respectability and wealth, but eccentric in manner and austere in appearance, almost to grimness, at an afternoon assemblage, once boasted that in his shop might be found ready for use, every article of blacksmith's work which a farmer would ordinarily require upon his farm during the year. The opportunity for fun was too good to be lost; a large party repaired to his well filled shop and after a close examination, no steel was

found to be used with a flint, to make a fire for burning the stubble on the meadows, and it cost the blacksmith a pretty penny to escape the laugh, and treat the company.