

# R-119

## Life in the Country at the Turn of the Century

By Reuben Backhaus

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Entered on computer by S. Connie Halbur, March. 2006

*The term "Sic" means that the specific text after which it appears was copied as written even though it appears to be in error.*

*This article by Mr. Backhaus was in typescript.*

*The following was the lower right hand corner of the cover page of the original document:*

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I was born five years before the turn of the century so I remember life as it was then. There were no telephones, no electricity, and no cars. Horses and the railroad were the only means of travel, if you discount your legs! Oh, yes, there was the bicycle and one built for two but few people could afford these.

The railroad depot was the busiest place in town. The trains carried everything coming in and going out of town. Three men worked steadily here at the depot. One worked in the ticket office and did the bookkeeping while the other two took care of the freight and the express. The mail came in and was carried to the local post office. From there it was carried by horse to the country towns nearby. The people would pick up their mail twice a week. Postage rates were 2 ¢ for a first class letter and 1 ¢ for a post card. There were no local newspapers so the ones they got were from the cities. Most of these were produced bi-weekly and they cost about \$1.50 a year.

We had a one room school. It had an entry where the children kept their clothes and dinner buckets. In front of the classroom was the teacher's desk. In the middle was a big box stove which had two-seated desks around it. Then in the back was the woodshed. The drinking water had to be carried from a nearby farm well. The school term was seven months, from October to May. The children all had to walk to school. Some had to walk as far as two miles, snow or no snow. We were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, and spelling. The teachers were not high school graduates but rather bright boys or girls who were 18 years old or older. They had to take an examination at the county seat and if they passed they were given a certificate to teach. I remember the first teacher I had in 1900. She was paid \$18 per month. Out of this she paid \$3.00 a month for room and board which left her \$15 at the end of the year.

By 1900 most log barns and houses had been replaced with stone basement barns and frame or brick houses. Building itself was cheap because farmers had a lot of timber. Labor was also cheap. Masons and carpenters were paid \$1.00 per day plus meals. They

worked from sunrise until sunset. A good sized barn and house could be built for about \$1000.00.

Our homes were heated with wood. There was a kitchen stove and a big round heater for the rest of the house. The only lights were homemade candles and kerosene lamps for the house and a lantern for the barn. There was also no plumbing so we used outhouses. For hot water a big copper boiler was kept on the stove and was always filled with rain water from a cistern. The drinking water had to be carried from the well.

Our clothes were mostly homemade. Mittens, stockings, stocking caps, and sweaters were wool spun and knitted. Shirts and suits were also made at home from goods bought at the local store. The material cost from \$.10- \$.25 a yard and the thread was \$.05 a spool. A pair of shoes and rubbers was about \$3.00 so most of the children went barefoot from May until October. Ninety per cent of the things in the store were sold in bulk. They had to either be weighed or measured out.

The farmers grew corn, wheat, barley, rye, oats, clover, timothy hay, and potatoes. Because they were diversified they didn't have to depend on just one crop. The wheat was taken to a nearby mill and ground into flour. The rest was sold for \$.60 - \$.90 per bushel. Most farmers had cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry. The machinery needed were a wooden beam hand plow, a straight-toothed harrow, a grain binder, a hay mower, a dump rake, and a broad cast seeder. These were all horse driven. We also had a wooden-wheeled wagon, buggy, cutter, and a bob sleigh. Some people had a two-horse surrey and hand tools. [*“Hand tools” is written in in long hand. It may have been added by Mr Reese.*]

Dairying was now coming on the scene. There were only a few cheese factories so most of the farmers still had cream separators. These were hand turned at a certain speed which separated the cream from the whole milk. [*Sic*] The skim milk was mostly fed to the calves and hogs but some of it was made into cottage cheese. The cream was collected about three times a week and hauled to the creamery where the butter was made. The farmers received about \$.40 per hundred pounds of milk. They kept enough at home to churn into butter for their own use.

The surplus livestock was bought by local buyers. They were hauled to town and put in stockyards. They were then loaded into stock cars and shipped by rail primarily to Chicago. Hogs netted about \$.05 per pound, cattle from \$.02-\$.05 per pound, and calves from \$.05-\$.07 per pound.

Any good sized farm of eighty acres or more had hired men. These men were paid from \$15.00-\$20.00 per month plus board. Most of the people had larger families so the children had to migrate to towns and cities in order to find jobs. It was due to this and immigration that our cities grew at such a rapid rate.

The only refrigeration they had was ice. They harvested it in the winter and stored it in ice houses. These were mostly owned by tavern keepers and butchers.

In the fall, after it froze, it was butchering time. A beef and several good sized hogs were killed. Some of the meat was frozen and kept in a cold room for winter and the rest was either brined, smoked, canned, or fried down in large mason jars and covered with lard to preserve it. If you wanted fresh meat in the summer you went into the chicken coop for a good fat hen or rooster.

For repairs they had the blacksmith. Besides shoeing horses he did all kinds of wood and steel work. There was one or more blacksmiths in every country town.

For power they used the windmill. This pumped the water, ground the feed, and cut the fodder. The rivers were dammed up for water power for mills to grind flour and feed, and to saw lumber. They also used a tread mill which was powered by horses. This was used to thrash the grain. The thrashing machine was no larger than the combine we use today. It had a cylinder and a fanning mill straw rack. It also had an elevator to carry the straw and a pipe to convey the grain to a bag or container to the granary. It took a crew of sixteen men to thrash grain. The portable steam engine, drawn by horses, was just coming into use at this time. Shortly after this the gasoline engine came into use also.

For recreation indoors the children played checkers, dominoes, and cards. Outdoors they played ball with a homemade ball and bat. In the winter they went ice skating or sleigh riding with a homemade wooden sleigh. Older people danced and played cards. They went from neighbor to neighbor for house parties. The musical entertainment at these parties was the accordion. They all drank homemade wine and applejack.

The young people went to public dances. There were small dance halls in every country town for music. The instruments used at the dances were the violin and the accordion. The most popular dances were the waltz and the square dances with a few polkas or Schottisches now and then. Admission for boys was \$.25 and ladies got in free. With beer costing \$4.00 per barrel, drinks were \$.05 for a 16 ounce glass.

Young men usually courted and married neighbor girls. In those days it was a disgrace for a girl not to find a husband and a still bigger disgrace to get divorced. Divorce was almost unknown in the country. Old maids, as they were called, either had to stay at home and do housework or enter some religious order. The women and little girls all wore dresses down to their ankles.

There were no nursing homes so the old people stayed with the child that got the farm. Only a few well-to-do people retired to town where they had built themselves a home.

On Sundays most of the people went to church and Sunday School. Some even walked 4-5 miles just to get to church. The clergy received a salary of \$400-\$500 per year but the church members were expected to give him meat, potatoes, flour, and other produce. The collection on Sundays was for pennies and only on holidays were the people expected to give more. Church dues were from \$4.00-\$12.00 per family.

My dad was the town clerk at the time and he told me that the highest tax payer in the town paid \$27.00 which three 200 pound hogs would pay. There was no income tax or sales tax either. However there was a road tax imposed by the town of so many mills which had to be worked by team or by hand. This is how roads were graded and graveled with pit run gravel. This was the only way roads were built and it didn't involve any cash money.

To prove how self-sustaining the farmers were I have this example. We were a family of five. I remember one year my dad kept a record of all cash receipts and expenses. The receipts were \$1200.00 and the expenses were \$600.00. This left \$600.00 in the bank.

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