

remembering the past

Excerpts from the Robinson Twp. Historical Society History Book

"Ancestors' Lifestyle in Moon, Fayette and then Robinson Townships, Part V"

Each issue will feature an excerpt from the Robinson Township history book. This excerpt continues with an overview of the frontier families and the pioneers' challenges in the late 1700's.

The fireplace was the center of the family living. Here, everyone performed his or her assigned tasks. Cooking was done there as well as drying of fruits, vegetables and herbs. Butchered meats were hung there smoking. Utensils hung there, tools stood there and candles were there on the mantelpiece. A corner cupboard held the family possessions. A spinning wheel, a homemade wooden table, benches and crude beds were the only other furniture. Best clothes were hung on wooden pegs on the wall. A visitor could tell the economic status of the family by what was hanging there. Making and keeping the fire burning in the fireplace was quite a job. If by chance the fire went out, a boy was sent to the neighbors for live coals which were brought back in a tinderbox. Matches were not introduced until 1810. Iron stoves came into used in 1749, but they were too heavy and bulky to carry over the mountains until the wagon trails began. Grease betty lamps were used which was smoky and smelly, but effective. Whale oil (spermaceti) gave a better light, but it was very expensive: \$25.00 a month for five hours per day of illumination. Few could afford this. Tallow candles were made when time was available to dip them. Housewives had to walk many miles back and forth on candle dipping day. Usually a winter's supply was made in the autumn.

Beds were crude. The first ones were small logs with one end fastened to the wall and the other end was supported on crouched sticks. A thin board for a lacing of rawhide or rope served as springs. Mattresses were made of straw and if you could afford it later, goose feathers. The linens were homemade from the farmer's own flax. Sometimes enclosed curtains kept out the cold and gave privacy. Other bedding was made of animal skins which proved to collect bugs and insects.

Facilities for personal hygiene were extremely primitive. Some rarely bathed anything except the hands and face. In summer men and boys went swimming but

it was considered indecent for girls and women. In the summer they went barefoot but they wore moccasins or wrapped their feet during the rest of the year after their first shoes wore out. The outside toilet reigned supreme in Pennsylvania until the beginning of the 20th century.

Grease rendered during butchering and fat collected from cooking was mixed with wood-ash lye. Ashes were collected in a barrel with a small hole at the bottom at the side. Water was poured over the ashes and the liquid collected in the bottom came out the spout as leached lye. The grease and lye were boiled together to make soft soap. This soap was used for everything from people to laundry and house cleaning. Before soap was available, the women washed at the stream, pounding the clothes with a paddle to cleanse them. Households were frequented by fleas and mosquitos in the dampness.

Salt was a very expensive item and practically non-existent here except for in brackish waters. Salt was evaporated from these lakes. Otherwise, salt had to be brought from Philadelphia and Baltimore. A bushel cost as much as a cow or horse.

The pioneer family was held together by practically indissoluble bonds of religion and economics. Marriage was for life, not for temporary convenience even if marriage was a necessity for a social existence. United efforts were required for shelter, food and clothing for the family. Any personal dissatisfactions had to be subordinated to this paramount obligation. The subservient status of the wife prevented homes from disbanding. Women were under the ancient English law. Husband and wife were one; the wife had no legal status. Marriage gave the husband title to all her property. Legally, he could whip her if he thought it necessary. If the husband died, remarriage was an absolute necessity for the wife. There was no way for her to earn a living for her family. All women could secure husbands because of the preponderance of males. Young folks

married early; girls from 14 to 16 and boys 18 to 21. A girl prepared for marriage while yet a child. A mother taught her all the secrets of keeping a household and she wove her own future linens. Meanwhile, her parents carefully accumulated her dowry. The son was taught all the skills necessary for his future life. The census of 1790 showed an average family of seven was common, even if infant mortality was high. Much larger families were not uncommon. Boys and girls worked for their parents without pay until they were married. The colonial family was a close-knit economic unit operated in the patriarchal manner. Each member had definite assigned duties even when barely able to walk and the family was always busy.

Children were expected to be miniature adults with very little time for anything resembling child's play. Sunday was a welcome day of rest.

In case of sickness, the mother was the doctor and she used medicinal herbs. Unfortunately many rural physicians were quacks. Rheumatism and pneumonia were common. All kinds of fevers and tuberculosis were prevalent. Only after 1750, standard procedures were bleeding, purging and vomiting. Gradually, medical science was improved and doctors were extremely well regarded. The doctors rode horses to see their patients and their salary amounted to 25 cents per mile. Neighbors helped each other. Many old time methods were ridiculous, but were used by all. Standbys in the home were Calomel, Ipecac, Camphor, and Boneset.

Excerpted from the Robinson Township Bicentennial Book. Complete copies of the book can be purchased for \$25 by calling 412/264-2733.