

Recording History Through Diaries: As Told by a Farmer's Wife

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In the 1920s, Woodbury was a rural town of three hamlets. In the surrounding hills were numerous small farms that supplemented their income by renting rooms to city vacationers. Diaries reflected the life and times of these families and were running accounts of chores, activities, weather, and illnesses. Very few personal feelings, thoughts, or emotions were shared.

The diary of Bertha Wachendorf Helbing portrays life on a 274-acre farm, rented from the Rider family of Central Valley. It was located on the side of a mountain overlooking Woodbury Falls and Mountainville, five miles from town and about a half mile from the main highway. Bertha was born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1865, the daughter of German immigrants who owned a successful grocery business. She married a German immigrant, a licensed butcher. In 1900, they moved north. Together, they operated the farm and raised five boys (one daughter died at age two). Diary entries reflect that she was an articulate woman whose energy had no boundaries. Despite her isolation, she managed to carve out a meaningful life. She had her own egg business with papa taking the eggs to town in the wagon, selling them for 80 cents a dozen in 1920. They ran a boarding house in the summer to supplement the cash flow, sometimes feeding up to thirty-two boarders at two sittings (usually on weekends). She was a patriotic American and passed that passion on to her children and grandchildren. She loved "Decoration Day" and was proud to share her February 22nd birthday with George Washington. The harshness of our January 2011 weather prompted me to re-read Bertha's 1920 diary entries more carefully. Her January 1st entry is the only personal reference regarding the new year ahead.

"The end of a perfect day. I hope we will have more days in the 365 days to come when I can begin my diary like this. E and C (her oldest sons) came up last night. Papa called for them at the station. Had pork loin roast, sauerkraut, mashed potatoes and rice pudding for dinner. Papa took a nap, E played the piano, C & R read and O & W were sleigh riding (R, O & W are youngest sons)."

But this calmness was not to continue throughout the winter.

January 10: *"Everything covered with ice. Glistened in sun like a million diamonds."*

January 14: *"Boys did not go to school today. Mr. Earl called and said teacher was sick with mumps." Writer's note: Teacher was Miss Helen Pierce, later to marry Percy Redner, successful Central Valley car dealer."*

January 15: *"So cold, 3 [degrees] below 0 and windy. Paper said wind blew 72 mi/hr at 8 o'clock."*

January 21: *"Mr/Mrs. Cornell drive toward Cornwall to open road." (Homeowner was responsible to keep highway in front of property open).*

January 31: *"Coldest day this winter. 9 [degrees] below 0 at 8 o'clock a.m. 10 [degrees] below 0 at bedtime. Papa smoked meat this a.m. but had to give it up as it was too cold."*

February 1: *"17 [degrees] below 0 @ 7:15 a.m."*

February 4: *"Mr. Spencer came in afternoon to take the census." (Census taken every 10 years).*

February 5: *"Snowing and windy, all drifts, and boys cannot go to school. Snowed all day and night, snow heavy as gravel. Shoveled paths in morning but in afternoon could hardly be seen."*

February 8: *"Papa and the boys are shoveling snow down to Cornell's." (Writer: about half mile distance).*

February 9: *"Shoveled all day on the road from Cornell's to highway."*

February 10: *"Snowed quite hard. In morning Cornell came to help shovel snow to make the road wider for the sleigh to go through. In afternoon all shoveled on the highway." (Road in front of property).*

February 12: *"Men are shoveling snow."*

February 14: *"R and Papa shoveled snow all day on the highway."*

February 16: *"Road all drifted shut again. In one place Cornell put down a stick 4 feet deep."*

February 19: *"No school. Teacher could not get through on account of heavy snow."*

February 21: *"Hull's team and men came to break the road. Snowed almost every day in February.--very cold." (Russell Hull, Highway Superintendent).*

March 6: *"Still heavy snow and wind and drifting. Snow drifts higher than before. Can't see the barn or the toilet from the kitchen window." (no indoor plumbing).*

March 7: *"Teacher called, no school until Wednesday."*

The diary tells of the efforts to get food supplies for the family and the animals in the winter. The procedure was to get supplies to a neighbor several miles closer to town. Then the boys and Papa would walk to the farmer, load up the sleighs, and pull them up the mountain. This included hay, chicken feed, fertilizer, potatoes, bread, oil, corn, the mail, newspaper, and other supplies. Bertha recorded the slaughtering of animals for food for the family and also selling meat to Woodbury butchers.

The ongoing thread of recorded activity is the additional work of the family, repairing shoes, cleaning the stove and oiling the kitchen floor, making dresses and aprons, mending clothes, reading, churning butter, baking, bread making, setting up the egg incubator, chopping wood, putting eggs in "waterglass" (By March, Bertha had put over 1000 eggs in waterglass). By the end of March, all thoughts turned to preparing for the tourist trade. This included major cleaning, wallpapering and painting. Requests for summer reservations are noted in Bertha's diary entries commencing in March 1920.

In summary, not once in this diary is there a reference that Bertha ever left the property from her January 1st entry until "Decoration Day," the end of May. She planned on Papa taking her to Newburgh in the wagon for the patriotic festivities. When the day came, she was ill and could not go. It was not until July that she records leaving the property. Papa took her in the wagon so she could do an errand. So, it was in 1920 that this farmer's wife left a seemingly unimportant daily accounting, thus giving us a peek into life over 100 years ago.