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MRS. COOKE'S CIVIL WAR DIARY FOR 1863-1964

IT is more than ninety years since Vermont's surviving Boys in Blue came back to their beloved Green Mountain homes. The Civil War seems very remote now; memories of hardships of farm folk during the War between the States are receding in time. During our childhood, though, the Rebellion was scarcely as long ago as World War I is today, and we have heard many tales from the lips of those who fought or worked when *John Brown's Body* was a currently popular song.

Inexorably, relentlessly the decades have rolled by. Change has come to all of our fourteen counties; where farms once abounded we find gaping cellar holes, ill-concealed by neglected lilacs. The lace-work of back country roads has in large measure been replaced by hard surfaced highways. Except in rare instances, crossroads country stores have vanished. High powered automobiles have replaced plodding horses, so a trip to the city is a matter of half-hours rather than half-days. Milk is rushed to Boston in huge tank trucks, so the buttery and the spring-house are no longer cherished features of Vermont farm homes.

But in spite of progress, several Vermont towns have preserved their rural flavor. In a few places pre-Rebellion charm still lingers even if post-Revolution vigor has diminished. Such an area is Corinth; one can't resist its appeal in any season. The Corners, Goose Green, the Meadow, the Hollow, Cookeville, Taplin Hill, East Corinth—just one visit and you are captive forever. Here Mahounquamassee (the Waits) and many lesser streams continue their age-long sculpturing of everlasting hills; here wild things still abound in forest, field and stream.

Through the kindness of Professor and Mrs. Austin L. Olney of the University of New Hampshire our staff has had access to *Daily Pocket Remembrancers* written in 1863-1864 by a Mrs. [George] Cooke, a Corinth farmer's wife then in her middle fifties. Apparently she had "Scads of relatives and friends" on her husband's side as well as her own. *Dei gratia*, she kept a diary, a document which tells us (though she didn't set it down with such intention) that she was a wonderful cook, a fine seamstress, a compassionate neighbor and a faithful friend.

Mrs. Cooke's folks were not wealthy. They didn't lack for the necessities of life, but they had to *work* for everything, and in Civil War days work was WORK. Theirs were the "short and simple annals of the poor;" incessant toil, company in droves, hailstorms, funerals, haying, soapmaking all are recorded in the *Remembrancers*. Occasionally there were pleasant punctuations in these life sentences—"fresh hallibutt," "frolecks at the centre," and singing schools. All these were common enough in peace times, but during the Civil War every joyful occasion stood out like an oasis in a desert.

Let us examine some of Mrs. Cooke's daily comments and share with her the burdens, sorrows and happinesses of a "rural deestricht" in 1863-1864. No attempt has been made to edit her diaries except to select germane passages and to emphasize separate ideas by the insertion of dashes. Of course, extraneous words inserted by our staff are enclosed in conventional brackets. []

1863

Friday Jan. 2.—Splendid day—Harold Winchester and wife here—stichd her cape—had a good time

Thursday Jan. 8.—Cool but verry pleasant—Mrs. Mansfield Taplin & Louise Washburn here—stichd their capes

Sunday Feb. 1.—Most beautiful day just as warm as summer—the spiritualist preaches to the holler

Tuesday Feb. 24.—Pleasant day—Daniel gone to Bradford—Geo & Victor went to dancing school got home 4 in the morning

Sons George and Victor were to capitalize on their ballroom lessons as later events will testify. But here is a break in the family circle:

Saturday March 21.—[Cousins] Corry and George [here] for the last time they start tomorrow [for the war]

On *Wednesday March 25* there was no water in the well but it rained most of that day as well as Thursday. All through the ensuing spring months we find references to well trouble, unseasonable weather, work, Company (yes, capital C!) and worries of war. Mrs. Cooke was forever helping her relatives and neighbors in emergencies; she notes several deaths, some of which *seem* to have been caused by diphtheria, while others are actually labelled as the result of diphtheria.

Monday July 20.—Wilson Robie died last evening 12 oclock

Tuesday July 21.—Wilson Robie burried

Wednesday July 22.—Mrs. Robie went to her husbans grave found it still open.—forgot to cover it up verry singular.

(Were the sextons afraid of contagion?)

Monday July 27—Jim here haying
—[bro?] Jack got killed after Gettisburg

After Jack's death Mrs. Cooke apparently lived in fear that her men-folk would be conscripted. Here are some early August entries:

Wed. August 5—Pleasant finished haying—Louisa Washburn Olive Dow Lyman Fitts Dr. John Fitts—full of company—the draft draft

Thursday August 6—Heavy shower hailstones big as birds eggs—Laura Avery Sarah Powers here in evening—the draft draft

But farm work had to go on, draft or no draft, war or no war.

Monday August 24—Rainy—Geo a-making his soap—Old Lady Eastman & 2 daughters and 2 grand dau's here—Geo gone a fishing

Just like a man to duck out with a pole and some bait, and leave his wife to entertain "wimmin folk!"—but diphtheria strikes again and again . . .

Tuesday August 25th—Volney Avery dreadful sick—Dr. Howard Drs him

Friday August 28—Volney Avery died—Mr. Winchester brot toma-toes—stichd Minerva's cape

Saturday August 30—Geo. and [daughter] Minor gone to Volney's funeral—Mr. Frost spoke

(The Rev. Dr. Timothy Prescott Frost later became pastor of a large Methodist congregation in Evanston, Illinois. He died at Bradford, Vermont on July 5, 1937.)

Diphtheria again. . . .

Saturday September 12—Dr. Downs died—Dr. Scott verry sick—sent for Dr, Pool DIPTHRERA—Mrs. Farnum & 5 children here to dinner

Sunday September 13—Dr. Scott died about 8 in evening dipthrra—Mr. Farnum here

Monday September 14—Dr. Downs burried burried—Mr. Farnum here painted our floor

Thursday September 15—Mr. Farnum to the store to work—carried Dr Scott to greens Borough to be buried

Thus within the week two country doctors died, leaving Corinth and surrounding rural areas very, very short of medical service. But work had to go on. . . .

Wednesday September 16—Pleasant—Victoria & Cora Fitts Abby Cooke & Nelly Farnum Abby Carpenter here to dinner—papered the back house

Still sorrow, more sorrow . . .

Thursday October 1—Robert Orr's girl sick diphtheria—Dr. Alva [Carpenter] doctors her—Martin Clement died

Saturday October 3—Raining—Martin Clement buried—Four students from Hanover [Dartmouth College] came up to funeral.

Monday October 5—Robert Orr child died with diphtheria

Drudgery, the Draft, Diphtheria—these seemed to be the worrisome lot of Corinth neighbors. Early in November Mrs. Cooke let "Dr. Alva" come to look at her sore throat; happily it wasn't due to diphtheria. A few days later she indited this sad comment: "lost our little dog." Her fifty-fifth birthday arrived on schedule November tenth, but she entered that datum as casually as the fact that "the ground froze hard." There were six or seven extra at Thanksgiving dinner, "not counting small children." A month later she was busy with Christmas which in those days was still celebrated (or at least noted) for twelve days. The round of dinners and "singing schools" was interrupted by necessary visits from Dr. Carpenter, and the year 1863 closed with these none-too-cheerful memos:

Wednesday December 30—Lilly some better—Susan Brown in evening—singing school

Thursday December 31—Lilly is worse sent for Dr. Alva—Mrs. Jacob Brown buried—pleasant 7th day of Christmas

And so Leap Year 1864 arrived, the last full twelve month of the Great Rebellion. On New Year's Day Mrs. Cooke wrote

1864

Friday January 1—Put on new boots.—warm & raining—Geo. & Vic gone to Bradford to ball.—Leander & wife & McKenzie here in evening.—Lilly better.

1864

Saturday January 2—Harrymans child buried—cold as blazes Geo & Vic got home from ball almost froze to death 2 o'clock in afternoon.—new boots on

(From other sources we have learned that the new boots were probably Christmas presents, handmade boots from Adams at the center; very attractive, very useful, very welcome. The New Year's ball at Bradford was THE big event of its kind in Eastern Orange County,

so George and Victor went along in spite of illness in the family. We wonder what kept them until two in the afternoon, when Bradford is about a dozen miles, round trip?)

But Death struck again . . .

Sunday January 3—Noah Avery child buried—clear and cold Geo. been to holler—Lilly is better—Abby got home—Joseph went to war

Monday January 4—Clear & cold Susan Brown here—put on my new boots

Tuesday January 5—Snowing all day—Laura Avery and Sophia here all day—we made Byrons shirts on machine.

How characteristic of Yankee women! the Averys, probably the mother and the sister of the child buried on Sunday, trying to ease their sorrow by plunging into work, work, work. And Mrs. Cooke "having them in" to use the new-fangled machine . . .

The next night there was a singing school in the Cooke front room; on Saturday January ninth there was another at a home a mile or so up the road. These "schools" were really songfests, a happy neighborhood diversion in those TV-less years.

Saturday January 9—Comfortable day pleasant—Geo gone to holler to mill—singing school Mrs. Tenney staid with me—Mrs. Dow died

Sorrow again, and a puzzle of sorts . . .

Monday January 11—James Ford child died—see an Owl and catch him in Barn Yard—Philo Carpenter moved to Waterbury in a box . . .—stove and fire and bed altogether—cloudy cold Abby washing

We wonder just what happend when Philo Carpenter moved to Waterbury. Was Philo an invalid? or an old man? Perhaps Philo's pre-Pullman conveyance was a big box-wagon, enclosed somehow, and warmed by a portable heater similar to those our Colonial great-greats used to bring to church?

Let us skip over weather, work and worry until

Monday January 18—Snowing hard—the professors are going to the acadmey [Corinth Academical Institute, circa 1843-1910] to a concert.—Abby gone home—Susan Brown here.

Tuesday January 19—Cloudy & raining—Susan Brown & myself doing the work—the singers are in the place

Wednesday January 20—Blistering cold day—concert to meeting house aft and evening

It would seem that Mrs. Cooke was boarding a troupe of singers, possibly from some church organization in Boston. They gave a concert in Topsham on Saturday January 23, which explains Mrs. Cooke's entry of that date to the effect that "we got up the big team, 30 went with [us] to Topsham.—Mrs. Tenney helped me do the work, Susan went to Bradford Wednesday."

Notes for the next week show more work, more company. Mrs. Cooke was not at all well, as the first February lines set forth.

Monday February 1—Feby come in like a Lion snowed all day—Jim taken up for stealing could not find the pistol—I am sick sent for the Doctor Alva [Carpenter]

Tuesday February 2—Pleasant mild—the doctor here—Jim owned up about the pistol

Wednesday February 3—Singing school—Geo Hale & wife here to supper—Jim had his court—cloudy

Thursday February 4—Jim gone to jail—pleasant—Winchester & wife—Brydon & wife—Isaac Wiggins & wife here for supper in evening.

Friday February 5—George & Victor gone to Fairlee to ball

Saturday February 6—Cloudy in afternoon boys got home from Ball

Sunday February 7—Pleasant and warm as summer—Geo & [daughter] Minor gone to meadow to meeting.—Victor gone to Bradford after his girl.—Martin Davis taken sick.

And so it went. Victor got home from Bradford, but without the girl. Martin Davis died and was buried on February 12; a town meeting was held at the center on February 13. A little later "the Dickinson girl died at her burrial the schollers went as mourners." Emma Lucas came for a long visit; Mr. Gilman attached Mrs. Tenney's property. Mrs. Cooke started and finished a dress for herself, for a change; she also "sticht up a cape" for a neighbor. (How many miles of stitching went into those capes!) Every night there were at least two and sometimes as many as six extra for supper so that from eight to fourteen sat down at evening meal. It is no wonder that on February 23d we find this entry *in another hand*:

February 23—Mrs. Cooke is sick & hardly able to be around.

February 24—Mrs. Cooke give up and take to her bed and sends for doctor to come & give her emetic. Mrs. Tenney sit up [with her].

Mrs. Cooke remained abed all through the week. Neighbors came and went, "spelling" each other with the housework and the cooking. We are somewhat reassured on

Monday, February 29—Doctor here finds her no worse. Verry sick. Thinks there is a chance for life.—Lays in a sleeping state—For 4 hrs.—Stand Sally C. in.

Mrs. Cooke sat up for a few minutes on March 8, but that day Lilia Richardson, who "had been helping out regular," came down sick and John C. went to Bradford to get Dr. Carter. Lillia died March 10 and was buried two days later. On that day Mrs. Cooke sat up a little, and the following Sunday was able to "be about 45 min." In another week she "set up 4 hr. and was dress, eat hearty & gaining fast" but not until *Thursday March 31* was she "just able to write a little. She "lays abed still 6 hrs. in a day." As the spring wore on she continued to gain, and by early summer she was back into the "full swing of things." But to Drudgery, Draft and Diphtheria came a new dreaded D in the form of *Drouth*.

Friday June 24—Pleasant—Fidelia Wilkins here—everything is suffering with the *Drouth*—dry dry dry

Another Avery child died Saturday June 25 and was buried at the Meadow next day. On Monday Mr. Hastings' child died. The *drouth* continued . . .

Thursday June 30—dry seems tho the earth would burn up

Saturday July 2—raining all day

But the rain didn't do much good; here's what we see for

Monday July 11—looks like rain—dry—awful sight of company here all the time—dry

Wednesday July 20—the earth is burning the sun & moon look like a ball of fire—2 Irishmen killed at Pike Hill [copper mine]

Tuesday July 26—Pleasant dry—company enough to kill—I am sick had the doctor

"A good spell of rain" finally arrived on Wednesday August 4. Most of the entries for August and early September were commonplace, but a certain Mrs. Wiggins was "expecting a man," possibly a soldier on leave . . .

Tuesday September 13—cloudy & dull—Mrs. Orr is buried—Mrs. Wiggins man has not come yet to get married she has waited 2 day.

Happily this was soon resolved by the man's appearance:

Thursday September 15—pleasant & cold—Mrs. Wiggins married to [at] Bradford

The 1864 presidential election was approaching, not without bitterness. Honest Abe in the White House had been blamed by many for Defeats, Death and the Draft; but as unpopular as he was in some quarters, Lincoln overshadowed his opponents and his banner was flown on many an Orange County flagpole. Mrs. Cooke's was no exception, but certain of her entries puzzle us.

Tuesday September 27—raised the Lincoln flag

Wednesday September 28—Jim home from jail [where he had been since February 4?]

Wednesday October 26—Sarah and Grandville here in evening—had (our? their?) flag staff sawd off

Thursday October 27—Almost done cleaning house—got a new flag staff—verry mad about the old one

Whenever political feelings run high enough to get "flag poles sawd off," elections are not altogether conducive to neighborly feelings. There were fewer supper-guests during the next few weeks. Here's what was written as the Election Day "rememberancer":

Tuesday November 8—Town meeting to vote Old Lincoln in president the second term—hope he will not get it but think he will.

After election the next eventful date should have been Mrs. Cooke's fifty-sixth birthday, November tenth, but scarcely any notice is made of it, and *only one guest* is recorded for Thanksgiving Day, November 24th. Perhaps the following entry explains the lack of festivities:

Friday November 25—yesterday Frank Ward died—also Phineas Bailey from the effects of opium.

The opium mentioned was probably laudanum which had been prescribed to ease the pain of the men's illness. Mr. Bailey was buried "to the Holler" on Saturday; on Sunday "George went to holler to Frank Ward's funeral, & Daniel cleaned out the back house" This chore seems to have made Daniel ill. (See Sat. Dec. 17.)

Ten days or so before Christmas the weather turned cold so several Goose Green folks had their hog-killin's. Normal neighborly trade and visits seem to have been resumed. . . .

Friday December 16—pleasant and cold—we had half a hog from Abel Fitts 200 and 17 pound paid 17c a pound.—Sandborn and wife here in evening.

Saturday December 17—we made “sausages” (“sassages” was crossed out, and “sausages” written below.)—cleaned the soule and tried the lard—Daniel is better goes to barn

(Soule or sowle is a sort of relish, or sauce like headcheese, made of pork scraps and cereal. “Cleaning the soule” probably referred to boiling the pork bones such as the head and ribs, and scraping off the meat to drop into hot cereal.)

The pork processing was interrupted by a soldier’s burial. . . .

Sunday December 18—pleasant day—Geo and Minor has gone to the Meadow to funeral (died in the army) of Leslie Parker

The next weeks were as usual full of work and company. Here is the entry for the Nativity,

Sunday December 25—pleasant and mild—Eliza Colby and Susan Brown here to supper first day of Christmas. rule Jan. (“rule Jan.” means: whatever the weather on Dec. 25, so will Jan. be)

and on St. Stephen’s,

Monday December 26—Minor went down to Adamses to get her shoes mended.—pleasant and warm—this day rules February

Tuesday December 27—Grandville was here fixing pump to the barn—beautiful weather this day rules March

We have no Cooke diary for 1865, so we don’t know if the twelve days of Christmas 1864 really “ruled” (predicted) weather in the ensuing twelve months. We do know that George went to a ball in Chelsea on the thirtieth and got back in time to have noon meal with Elsa Colby and Mrs. Joseph Norris on the thirty-first. So ended the *Remembrancers* for 1864.

We wish we could find the Cooke memoranda for 1865, especially those which dealt with the fated April when Lincoln was killed, and when peace arrived. We wish too that we could find out if son George kept up with his dancing, if Daniel won the girl in Bradford, and if the menfolk in the war got home all right! But that is a task for researchers.

As we read again the aging memoranda in Mrs. Cooke’s dairies,

we hear several passages echoing through the corridors of time. Mrs. Cooke didn't write those sentences, but they apply to her and every other Yankee farmwife who suffered through the Civil War. You'll find the lines in Proverbs 31: 10-31; they begin "a good wife is far more precious than jewels," and end "let her works praise her in the gates."

This offering on Mrs. Cooke's diaries is the joint effort of Leon Dean, Jeremiah Durick, John Huden and Marcus McCorison, all of the VHS Board of Curators. Grateful acknowledgement is hereby extended to Austin and Helen Olney of the University of New Hampshire for the loan of the diaries; also to Harold Slack of Montpelier for his aid in deciphering some of the notes.

J.C.H.

