



A Late-Nineteenth-Century Childhood in East Calais: Recollections of Ida Clee Bemis

Ida Clee Bemis, my grandmother, was born in East Calais in 1878, a descendant of Moses Haskell, one of the early settlers of the town. Though she lived there only thirteen years, her heart never left the land of her ancestors. She often regaled us with stories of her life there, and in the 1950s, urged on by Sylvia Bernard Larson, her oldest grandchild, she wrote down the narrative that follows. The text appears as she wrote it, with no corrections to the grammar or punctuation.

Transcribed by JUDITH M. ADAMS

My family consisted of my father and mother, Bernice and myself. My paternal grandparents were Lewis Bemis and Serepta Dwinnell Bemis. They lived in Marshfield and had three children: Luther, who was my father, born December 7, 1847; Ida, for whom I was named; and Abijah. My grandfather was a farmer. He had asthma very badly, which prevented him from going to the Civil War.

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Ida Clee Bemis, age about 13 years (ca. 1891). Courtesy of Sylvia B. Larson.

My maternal grandparents were Willard Rideout and Lydia Haskell Rideout. They lived in East Calais and had three children: Irene, Willard and Lydia, my mother, born March 2, 1851. My grandfather also had five children from an earlier marriage and Bernice was the daughter of his son Frank. Her mother died when she was a baby and Uncle Frank married a widow with two small children. Aunt Ellen showed a great deal of partiality to her own children and my mother persuaded Uncle Frank to give Bernice to her. For a long time he held out against it, but at last he felt so badly about the way Bernice was treated, he told my mother to come for her one day when he went to Montpelier. So my parents took her when she was three years old; it was two years before I was born. We were always on friendly terms with Uncle Frank and Aunt Ellen. After my grandfather gave up the farm in East Calais, they moved to a farm in Gospel Hollow. Bernice and I used to visit them when we got older and had good times with Aunt Ellen's children.

My mother learned the millinery trade in Marshfield and that is where she met my father. He had been up in the woods cooking in a lumber camp all winter and had a red beard all over his face when they were introduced. She said she thought he was the homeliest man she had ever seen.

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Ida Bemis's family home in East Calais (marked with an X), from an undated post card. The house in 1977. Courtesy of Sylvia B. Larson.

My father learned the shoemakers trade and had a shop after he married in East Calais. He made high boots for men. They came nearly to the knees. The heavy leather soles were put together with wooden pegs. I used to amuse myself by driving the pegs into a soft wood board when I was in the shop. After they began wearing factory-made boots, there was very little work, just repairing shoes, and my father did what little jobs around town that he was able to.

One thing he did was buying and selling calf skins. He bought them from the farmers and when he got enough, he would bundle them up and ship them to ex-Governor Carroll Paige [Page] in Hyde Park. Sometimes he would get a team and take them to Hardwick to the train and he would take me with him. It was a great treat sitting on the seat with him on that high lumber wagon. He always stopped at Woodbury Center and bought bananas, and visited with the man who owned the store. He liked to visit and people liked him. Bananas were a great treat, too, as we seldom had them.

I don't know how old I was when my father began working as hotel chef. I think the first place was in Stowe. My mother worked in the hotel, too. The first summer we were there Bernice and I lived outside the hotel, and my parents stayed with us nights and what time they had off in the afternoons. The next summer we lived in the hotel and Bernice sold little bouquets of flowers to the ladies as they sat on the hotel piazza in their rocking chairs in the afternoon. It was the Mount Mansfield Hotel and has since burned.

One winter we went to Orlando, Florida to work in the San Juan Hotel. It was a new hotel and the first one ever to be staffed by northern help. All the help went down together on the boat. We went down the St. John's River from Jacksonville on an old fashioned side wheel steamer. The river was very winding and narrow so that going around some of the bends, the boat would almost touch the river banks. It was a very interesting winter. We went to orange groves and saw our first grapefruits. They were not eaten then, and were called bitter oranges. I used to play with some children living near the hotel. One day they had company, two girls from Georgia, who called me a Yankee and would not play with me. I was very much puzzled and embarrassed.

One winter we went to Hardwick where my parents worked in the hotel. One summer my father cooked at the Roger's Rock Hotel on Lake George, NY and my mother and I boarded at a farm near the hotel for two weeks. For two seasons, while the Vermont Legislature was in session, my father was head chef at the Pavilion Hotel in Montpelier. My mother did chamber work and worked in the linen closet. Bernice waited on table and I went to school. The Legislature met every two

years beginning in the fall and lasting until spring. The Pavilion was the best hotel in the town and all the “big shots” lived there.

I think we children enjoyed ourselves as much and perhaps more than children of today and with comparatively few toys. We girls all had a doll and doll carriage but most of all we played paper dolls, which we cut out of old fashion books given us by the local dress maker.

Another favorite pastime was mud cake making. We each had our mud cake house in the wood shed. We prepared regular meals using different kinds of leaves for beefsteak and pork chops, and frosted our cakes with sawdust. How we treasured the handleless cups and pitchers and cracked plates we collected from all the neighbors! When summer was over, we packed them away until the next year.

We all liked to read and took books from the library. Every Christmas and birthday I received a book. I also took “The Youth’s Companion.” We liked games, too: Old Maid, Anthose Backgammon and Parchese.

In winter our favorite sport was coasting. The skating season was short as it usually snowed as soon as the mill pond froze over. We made the most of it while it lasted, the boys building a fire on the island so we could get warm. But coasting was something else again. We coasted from the day of the first snow until spring. Our favorite place was the road up the East Hill. We started almost up to the cemetery and coasted down to the church in the village, a good quarter of a mile. Once in a while some of the big boys would pass the church and go down the hill on the Plainfield Road, but that was too far to walk back up very often. We coasted day after day all winter. Sometimes the men would be drawing logs down from the East Hill to the mill in East Calais and would go back with empty sleds drawn by two horses. We would all pile on the sled and get a ride up the hill, laughing and talking with the sleigh bells ringing. I don’t know why we never had an accident as the road was narrow and there was one bad curve just before we got to [my friend] Mabel’s house. There wasn’t much traffic, but when we did meet a team, we had to steer into the snow bank.

In the spring, when the snow would thaw during the day and freeze at night, we would be out early to slide on the crust. Sometimes the parents would go too and slide until the crust melted. One time Bernice and I stayed overnight on East Hill and the next morning we coasted all the way home through the fields, over fences and stonewalls covered with snow. It was over a mile and would have been over two miles by the road. It was great fun and very exciting.

We never had but one sled between us. Bernice sat in front and steered with her feet and I sat behind her hanging on for dear life! Girls all used high sleds and sat on them and boys used low sleds and slid

“belly bumps.” Sometimes the boys made double-runners which were called traverse sleds.

In the fall we went to husking bees. On the barn floor, dimly lighted with lanterns, the sweet smelling hays in mows above, there would be two rows of people sitting facing each other with the corn in the husks piled between them, and everybody husking and talking and laughing. Anyone finding a red ear of corn was supposed to throw it to the person they had a “crush on,” and that person was supposed to catch the thrower and kiss him or her. Sometimes it would hit the wrong person, perhaps an old man with whiskers stained with tobacco juice. He would be only too glad to kiss a young girl and then how everyone would laugh and holler! After the corn was husked, everybody went into the house to supper. There would be baked beans and brown bread and all kinds of pies and cheese and new cider.

In the spring there would be sugar off. They put the maple sap in a large square pan which fitted on top of a brick arch with a fire under it. The sap was boiled until it turned to syrup. When it was nearly done, it would boil up to the top of the pan and they would put large spoonfuls of cream into it to keep it from boiling over. I would hold my breath thinking it would surely boil over, but it never did. Just before the syrup was ready we would dip some out into dishes and pour it out on pans of hard packed snow. Then eat and eat, then eat a pickle, then more sugar and so on ad infinitum. They used to whittle out little paddles to eat the sugar with. Of course, we could have used spoons, but it tasted better with paddles. When the syrup was ready, it was poured into pails and tubs. They used mostly ten pound pails and sold it for \$1.00 a pail.

Some of my happiest days were spent on my Aunt Rene’s farm in Pekin. They had a herd of twenty-five milk cows, three or four horses, a pair of oxen, pigs, hens, turkeys and geese. In sugaring time my cousin Phila and I stood on the oxen drawn sled and hung onto the edge of the huge round sap container for dear life as the road was very uneven and rough. We used to hunt for hen eggs in the hay mow every day just before supper. And in the fall we liked to ride out into the corn fields every night when the men took the hay wagon and brought it in filled with corn stalks that they had just cut. It smelled so good. Then they drove into the pasture and dumped the corn stalks in piles for the cows to eat. They had a very clever shepherd dog named Diamond who drove the cows in at milking time. Then there was a fine brook across the road in front of the house. It was about six feet wide and not over a foot deep with the bottom covered with pebbles and sand, a dandy place to wade and play.

Every September my mother’s brother, my Uncle Will, who was a

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The camp at Greensboro, 1900–1910. Lydia and Luther Bemis are seated on the porch; Ida and her husband, Anderson Bernard, are in the foreground. The boy holding the sailboat is unidentified. Courtesy of Sylvia B. Larson.

policeman in Boston, came to Vermont on his vacation. He would get off the train at Plainfield and hire a horse and covered buggy at the livery stable and drive up to Calais. He always took my mother and me to visit friends and relatives in Woodbury and Cabot. We visited my Uncle Clarke Rideout in West Woodbury and my Aunt Mary Rideout Noyes in Cabot and friends, and would be gone several days. I used to think my Uncle Will was rich to be able to hire a livery team that long.

Every fall the B&M Railroad used to run an excursion train to Boston, and a great many people took advantage of the low fare to visit the “Big City.” I think the low fares lasted ten days. We went down several times as my mother loved the city and my father had lots of cousins he liked to visit.

I think I was seven or eight years old the first time I went to Greensboro. My father had been there several times with Mr. White, Mabel’s father, who owned a camp there. At the time there were three camps on that side of Greensboro Pond, as it was called then. It was all dense woods there, with lots of low thick cedars among the tall beeches, ash and maple trees. Only fishermen went there then and that is how my father happened to go. He and Mr. White both liked to fish. One summer

my parents, Bernice and I planned to be real campers and live in a tent and cook outside. My father set up the tent on a knoll. It was large enough for two double beds and a shelf for dishes. He set up an old iron cook stove out doors. It would have been just fine except that soon the regular Greensboro rains set in, which ended our outdoor cooking. We slept in the tent and got our meals at Mr. White's.

My father and Abe George built the fourth cottage in those woods. At the time it was the best one there. It had two rooms downstairs and two upstairs. The stairs had a handrail and balusters made of branches of cedar trees with the bark taken off. Everybody thought that was very clever. None of the other camps had handrails on their stairs. My father also made a head and footboard of a bed from bent branches of cedar trees. The entire front of the downstairs part of the house was hinged so that it could be let down to form a piazza, lowered and raised with a rope and pulley. It made it very pleasant on fine, warm days, but not so good on cold rainy days, as, of course, there was no window in the front of the house, and it got very dirty being used as a floor so much. The camp was sold when we came to Boston to live.

It was getting hard for my father being on his feet so much as he had to in cooking. My mother didn't like living in the country. I was getting to the age when my friends, Maude and Mabel, were making plans to go to Goddard Seminary in Barre. My parents couldn't afford to send me, so they decided to sell the house in East Calais and move to the city so I could go to school.

This, as I remember it, is the story of East Calais and the people there from 1878 to 1891. Of course, I might have made it more exciting by adding some of the spicy village scandals, but you said you didn't want to hear them, so this is "The End."