

*Mrs. Waller's corrections
and additions*

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES: THE MIRACLE OF THE FOUR SEASONS

by Wilhelmine Kirby Waller

(These reminiscences were not originally written for publication. Mrs. Thomas Mercer Waller, a 50-year member of the Bedford Garden Club and former President of the Garden Club of America, found them recently among her archives and authorized their printing in abbreviated form. She still lives on the farm where she was raised on Guard Hill Road in Bedford, N.Y., and is a leader in environmental conservation.)

I have always been grateful that my childhood was spent before the days of organized play and a life which centered around the country club, for had such been the case in the 1920's when I was growing up, I presume that my world would have followed the existing pattern. As it was, my childhood in Bedford seems, as I look back on it, quite perfect.

Our occupations and interests were largely seasonal. In early January we picked out a clump of skunk cabbage to watch, measuring its growth meticulously every week through the medium of a notched stick and, after each heavy snow, always tromped into the swamp to see how it had fared. And we collected frogs' eggs from Mrs. Sutton's pond, which we considered a vast body of water as we kept a row boat on it.

Spring ended, as far as we were concerned, on Decoration Day with the Firemen's Parade. This was a red-letter day, for all the men on our place belonged to the Bedford Village Fire Department and marched in the parade, resplendent in navy blue uniforms. We would always contrive to ride on the fire truck either to or from the fire house.

Summer seemed the shortest season. I had a garden that I tended carefully, for the vegetables which came up were sold to Mother for exorbitant prices. The eggs that my chickens laid were peddled in the same high-handed fashion and collecting them each night never lost its interest, for I sold them by the egg and not by the dozen! The soundness of the economy of these ventures was never discussed, and Mother supplied the chicken feed as well as the garden seeds.

We had no swimming pool and on hot days we cooled off by sitting in the house where the cakes of ice, cut each winter from our pond, were stored. In this connection we were always in the wrong, for the ice house door was never supposed to be opened except by our farmer.

Our favorite picnic spots were the woods right across from the top of Guard Hill. We knew every inch of them, including the Indian campfire site. In those days the trees were not so dense and you could, when the weather was clear, see the Brooklyn Bridge from the summit.

We never failed to be on hand every evening to drive to Bedford Station in the Packard Twin-Six to meet Father's train. This also gave us the opportunity to browse in the general store, where we bought straw hats for both ourselves and our two farm horses, who wore them in order that the flies would not bother their ears.

Haying was our favorite farm activity and, as there was no baler, we were convinced that the hay never could have been gathered without our jumping up and down on the loaded wagon in order to make room for more hay.

In addition to the chickens and farm horses, our animal family included Mussey, a cat of unknown sex, who was often in disgrace because her favorite sleeping place was the middle of the red salvia bed by our front porch.

A We didn't keep cows because Rock Gate Farm's wonderful herd of Jerseys was right across the road from us and supplied us with milk, and with cream thick enough to eat with a spoon.

Mr. Willis Clark's Shetland ponies were within walking distance on Clark Road and we visited them almost daily, always remembering to speak politely to Judge Clark if we passed him, because Grandfather considered him such a fine man.

Three times a week I went to Bedford Village for a riding lesson. In those days little girls did not wear blue jeans, and jodphurs or breeches were too expensive for growing children. Instead I wore a middy blouse with a sailor collar and tie, and blue serge bloomers. My knees were bare and I can still remember how the stirrup leathers pinched when I cantered up the hill on old Daisy.

Of course the most momentous day of summer was the Fourth of July. It had double importance because it was also our farmer's wife's birthday, and we were allowed to pick all the sweet peas in the garden for her.

Abraham, our pet skunk who lived in the coal frame and whose grave still stands somewhat crudely marked "Here lies Abraham"; Jimmie the raccoon, who carefully washed his food before eating it and never ceased to be amazed at the way a cracker disintegrated in the water, and Sunny Brook Kitty, a dear little cocker who loved everyone, but the day the doctor took my tonsils out on the kitchen table, she thought that I was being murdered and bit him. The tonsillectomy was done at home as Mother felt her house was cleaner than any hospital and in it one would not be subjected to as many germs.

The Fourth of July was the one day when it seemed as though night would never come, for the big firework pieces were not, of course, set off until after dark. We had a wonderful display, which Mother always felt was a frightful waste of money but which Father and we adored.

We were, as children, remarkably good weather prophets and knew that the buzz-saw song of the cicada meant hot days, and that when cows lie down for long periods rain was coming. Likewise, we recognized the tree toad's eerie cry, prophesying rain, and the katydid's voice warning that frost was but six weeks away.

The first sign of autumn was the arrival of Miss Palmer, the public school teacher, who always boarded with our farmer during the first school term. She was a lovely lady and I longed to go to school in the one-room school house where she taught.

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~~The clock tower at Sutton's Corner was in a cupola atop a tremendous barn located in the center of Mrs. Sutton's red and green empire, and the grounds were landscaped by Olmstead, who also did the Rockefeller place and Central Park. The property had its own bowling alley, a tremendous greenhouse and a blacksmith shop. The main house had marvelous marquetry floors and carved woodwork and a wonderful collection of Monet and Manet paintings.~~

Come winter, we had our Flexible Flyers and toboggans, and the most thrilling coasting was to go down Guard Hill with Father on his bobsled. We would get up so much momentum that we could coast all the way down from the top of the hill. We always prayed to be snowed in but this never happened, for the flat farm sleigh, on which the cut ice was collected, could go through the heaviest of snows.

The preparations for Christmas were almost as exciting as the day itself. Mother's stocking was my responsibility and I can still remember buying things for it. I was always sorry Mr. Crane's store did not carry small enough items for stockings, for Mr. Harold Crane was one of my best friends. When he came to our house to lay carpet, he used to let me help, and I shall never forget his consternation the day I fell down a whole flight of stairs.

On one of the first cool days, Mother, would have us put on our best clothes, complete with patent leather pumps and white gloves, and go with her to call on our two most respected neighbors, Mrs. James Sutton and Mrs. Henry Marquand. Mrs. Sutton was R.H. Macy's daughter, and the clock now at Sutton's Corner was in a cupola atop a tremendous barn located in the center of her red and green empire, the grounds of which were landscaped by Olmstead who also did the Rickefeller place and Central Park. The property had its own bowling alley, a tremendous greenhouse and a blacksmith shop. The main house had marvelous marquetry floors and carved woodwork and a wonderful collection of Monet and Manet paintings, each in an overpowering gilt frame and placed on an easel which was shrouded in red velvet curtains.

Mrs. Marquand was the member of the Bedford Garden Club who represented us at Mrs. Bayard Henry's luncheon in Philadelphia on April 30th, 1913, at which the Garden Club of America was founded. It was at Mr. and Mrs. Marquand's White Gates Farm that the magnificent Wist^aria, Macrobotry^s was planted. These plants had been given to Mr. Marquand when he was in China collecting for the Metropolitan Museum of Art of which he was President from 1889^{to} 1902. Over the years, countless Garden Club of America members have traveled to White Gates Farm to see this Wist^aria with its blue and white flowers, often four feet long with stems like great twisted trunks.

We picked out our Christmas tree weeks before the big day, and I must admit were not too honest as to from whose property it was cut. In those days we were oblivious to any property lines and thought all the fields and woods within walking distance were part of our terrain.

Soon after Christmas, winter set in in earnest. The sweep of the wind on top of Guard Hill during a winter storm made us realize how great and strong and free is this world in which we live. As children, it made us instinctively pull in our tummies, throw back our shoulders and take a deep breath. And just as wonderful as the voice of the north wind was the silence of winter on a clear, cold night.

A February thaw turned us into engineers, and living on a hill had great advantages, for we made all manner of ditches, dams and gullies directing the water, at least momentarily, wherever we so desired.

A thaw was often followed by an ice storm, and the clashing glassy rattle of ice-coated trees was a terrifying noise, though when the sun shone it was a veritable fairyland.

Perhaps as children we took the miracle of the four seasons for granted, but it gave us a reassuring faith in tomorrow and made us aware of the infinite wisdom of nature.

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Childhood memories: dressed in our best

On one of fall's first cool days, Mother would have us put on our best clothes, complete to patent-leather pumps and white gloves, and go with her to call on two most respected neighbors, Mrs. James Sutton and Mrs. Henry Marquand.

Mrs. Sutton was R. H. Macy's daughter. The clock, now at Sutton's Corner, was in a cupola atop a tremendous barn located in the center of her red and green empire. The grounds were landscaped by Olmsted, who did the Rockefeller place and Central Park. The property had its own bowling alley, a tremendous greenhouse and a blacksmith shop. The main house had marvelous marquetry floors, carved woodwork and a collection of Monet and Manet paintings, each in an overpowering gilt frame placed on an easel shrouded in red velvet curtains.

Mrs. Marquand was the Bedford GC member who represented us at Mrs. Bayard Henry's luncheon in Philadelphia on April 30, 1913, at which The Garden Club of America was founded. The magnificent Japanese wisteria, *Wisteria floribunda* 'Macrobotrys,' was planted at the Marquand's White Gates Farm. Mr. Marquand was president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1889 to 1902, and the plants were given to him when he was in China, collecting for the Museum. Countless GCA members have traveled to White Gates Farm to see this wisteria with its blue-and-white flowers often four-feet long, on stems like great twisted trunks.

W. K. W.



Childhood Memories

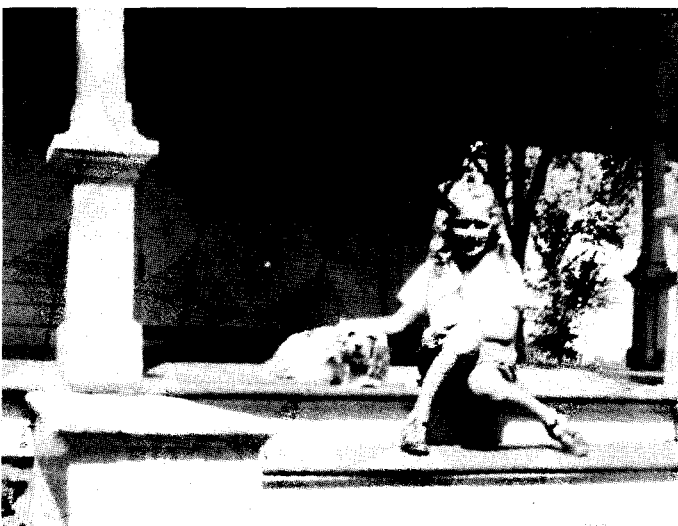
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Willie and her cocker spaniel, Sunny Brook Kitty.

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Weather prophets

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Wilhelmine Kirby Waller

Bedford GC (NY), Zone III

Willie Waller, a 50-year member of Bedford GC and a former GCA president, found these reminiscences among her papers. Mrs. Waller, a leader in environmental conservation, still lives on the farm where she was raised. —Ed.