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Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

Memories of Broxted

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Although I was born in California, my mother, Laura Poole was born in Broxted, Essex. Here is a story she told me:

'The date is 1910, when as a girl of twelve years, I lived in a small village among the meadows, brooks, and endless miles of flowering hedges and trees. All was peaceful in my little village... a church, post-office, mill, school and a candy shop. A few groceries were supplied by Mrs. Willis, whose shop emitted such a glorious odour. After climbing the wooden steps to her shop, and ringing the doorbell (which tinkled), you entered to the grand and wonderful array of cheeses, candles, bread, onions, tobacco, tea - oh, just anything a wide-eyed child could look upon and wish for! The school was a two-room building, one for infants under six, and the other larger room across the hall (which served also as the cloak room) for the older children up to the fifth grade. This was a cold brick building heated only by a wood or coal open fire. I sometimes wonder how we were able to study and write on those cold slates. But we did and several students later attained prominence in the world. On Sundays, we again gathered in the school and later marched down the road to the beautiful old St. Mary's Church, which is over 500 years old. It has been carefully restored, and maintained, and has lovely stained glass windows. I was one of the few to sit in the much honoured choir stalls and be a part of the choir. Of that I was very proud! I loved music and took lessons on an old pump-organ from the school-master's daughter, Amy.



Tuesday was a very important day in the lives of a few of us 'older' girls. Today we would leave the school-room to ride in a horse and cart... not a carriage, you'll note, but a noisy, ill-constructed cart drawn by a clumsy horse with iron shoes. How those shoes would kick up sparks as he ran or trotted over the flint stones, with which the roads were built. We used to watch for those sparks whenever some farmer would go hurrying by on his trip to the market with his butter and eggs, or perhaps to meet a train eleven miles away. It was always the same horse because Mr Barker had only one horse and it's name was 'Charley'. Mr. Barker whose name was George, always wore the same clothes, a brown sort of leather jacket and a black and white checkered cap pulled down close to his eyebrows. With this image in mind, I think I would have been afraid to ride with him, but in those days of almost no other horse and buggy traffic, 'Ole George' was safe. We loved the ride to the little town when it didn't rain, but because it might, we always took our umbrellas. Ole George wouldn't go if it was already raining. 'Too much mud' he would say. There was a narrow lane where a little stream crossed on our way. It was known as Watery Lane and Charley didn't like to get his knees wet, George said. Mother said it caused Ole George too much work polishing his harness if he went through the mud. But sometimes we got caught in a shower, and when this happened, we looked like eight little black mushrooms on wheels going home, all crouched together on two side slats in the cart.

Today we were not going on a joy ride, indeed, it was part of our school education that the older girls should learn cooking (not Home Economics as it is now called). These were just plain cooking lessons which took place in a little town, four miles away, where other schools also sent their students to gather in a large building. I remember it had an asphalt floor, seats in rows... like benches, cupboards and a long enclosed black stove with chimney and many shiny pots and pans hanging all around on the walls. The lesson to be learned this particular day was how to prepare and cook (on the dreadful black stove) vegetable soup, fish cakes, and apple dumplings. I remember the miscellaneous vegetables that went into that soup, and how good it turned out to be hours later. Class is over, pans all shiny bright back on the wall, cleaned with white sand, floor swept, towels washed. Now the big moment when for a few pennies, we could take our choice of the food which we had cooked. We were eagerly looking forward to proudly presenting this food to our mothers... the vegetable soup was my choice, steaming hot from the stove. I had to sit up by the driver, right over the horse's rear end. After all of the girls were seated, Ole George gave the horse, Charley, the signal to 'giddy up'. Charley took off with a lurch. The soup spilled over on the horse's rear-end... another large lurch was the result of this hot soup on his bottom, and more soup spilled... Over and over this happened, until alas, there was not a drop left in the very large bowl. All I had now to present to my family, who were eagerly awaiting my return, was an empty bowl!