

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

A 19th-Century Christmas Was Quite Different Than Now

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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The faded typescript in the Sheldon archive begins with a little poem:

Listen my children and you shall hear/Some wonderful tales of a bygone year./Bygone so long, it is hard to tell—/Truth from fiction are mixed so well.

So begins the memoir of Bernice Douglas Reed, whose recollections of her girlhood bring back the lost world of children in Shoreham at the end of the 19th Century.

Her parents had married on a cold winter day in February 1883. Frank Douglas struggled to make a go of it on their farm, the Old Birchard Place. “My father was a quiet man and I can’t remember his ever giving a real belly laugh but he would smile and his blue eyes would twinkle.” Her mother, Helen Burge Douglas, was a hard-working farm wife with quick temper. “She used to say the reason she and Papa got along together was because they never got mad at the same time.”



**Bernice Douglas and her little brother, Malcolm.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum**

Bernice (that’s BURRness, not BerNIECE) grew up in a tight-knit community surrounded by a large extended family. There was Grandpa Burge, a Methodist preacher turned Congregational Church janitor, who was often caught talking to himself. “When asked to whom he was talking he would say ‘that sensible person.’” There was Grandma Douglas, who made the best doughnuts, aunts who had spent their youths stealing each other’s beaus and an uncle who told her how terribly hot it had been the day he spent at the Battle of Gettysburg.

The family was poor, but small enough that Bernice had her own room. “It was strictly mine to do with as I pleased.” It opened on to the room of her sole sibling, a little brother named Malcolm. Young Malcolm “had two little dolls that he kept in

his bed long after he stopped playing with them. One was Sister, a tiny doll with a

china head. The other was Sambo, a black stocking doll.” He loved them dearly. “We often found them where he had slept on them but their rather nobby presence may have given him some needed comfort.”

Her earliest Christmas memories were of waking up in the cold farmhouse. “The darkness stared in through the uncurtained windows and the lamp tried to dispel the gloom but hardly succeeded. The wood stove roared mightily but still the room was not warm, just a little warmer than it had been.” Do not imagine a Christmas tree, for “No one decorated their rooms as they do now, and the gifts weren’t done up in pretty paper, either.” Instead, “There was a chair that looked as if it held some presents. I was in a hurry to see what it was but mama said to wait till papa came in from the barn.” Looking back on these first meager Christmases, “I was blessed with five aunts or my Christmas would have been slim indeed.”

Winter was a jolly time for the children who lived near the village. Bernice was a student at Newton Academy. At lunch time the teachers left the building to go to eat in peace and the school became a free-for-all. “The big boys held the little ones over the well and scared them out of their wits.” There were mammoth snowball fights that ran right through the building. Bernice’s greatest moment of triumph involved a boy named Kenneth Clark, who was known for having the loudest mouth in the school. “One day he came charging full speed and full bellow, through the hall. I had an unusually dirty snowball and let him have it. It made a bull’s eye and hit him squarely in the mouth. Never was a holler stopped so suddenly. I guess it surprised me as much as it did him.”

It was an era when children enjoyed a great sense of safety and autonomy. They were generally free to play games of their own devising, rather than being signed up for multiple adult-structured activities. There were a number of exciting winter play possibilities. When Bernice was small, she had a little sled and her mother, “gave me a push that sent me well over the grassy spot where she thought I’d stop, but I nearly ran into the fence that bordered the bank by the road.” This was a scare for mother, who “had a bad case of heart failure when the sled went merrily on toward the fence, but it stopped just short of disaster, and her darling daughter was saved, no doubt, from a slight bump.”

Despite occasional close calls, Mrs. Douglas did not grow overprotective. Her daughter later looked back and admired her mother’s ‘common sense.’ “She tried to bring us up to think for ourselves and would often say, ‘Do it yourself, I won’t be with you always.’”

Bernice spent much of her time running free with the other kids in the neighborhood. “One year snowshoes were all the rage but we were too poor for them so we sent to Montgomery/Ward for some skis. They cost \$1.50 a pair.” Ski design was still in its infancy: “They were six feet long and some four inches wide with three grooves in the bottom thickened some under the foot and with a toe strap that ran through and could be tied as fitted your foot. That was all there was to them.” They did not come with

poles, so “Papa made us some ten foot balancing poles with a cut off nail in each end so we could steer them a little.” With a little luck, “If you had them parallel when you started there was some chance of your reaching the bottom of the hill.” The skis had a tendency to strike off on their own. “If you wanted them to stay on you took a leather shoelace and tied the strip to it and around the ankle.” Bernice was proud to report that, “We didn’t have any fancy clothes and did no slaloms but we could go straight down.” On one exciting night, “quite a number of us went out to ski by moonlight. This also had its pitfalls as you weren’t aware of the little dips and bumps in the hill and we had a very exciting ride.”

When the kids weren’t skiing, they were organizing skating parties. Bernice had weak ankles, “[so] again I didn’t shine with any brilliance.” Her mother bought her skates one Christmas, “But they proved to be too short and that threw me off balance and the toes were apt to get stuck in the ice.” It snowed during a memorable skating party and the girls went to the neighbor’s house with their clothes soaked through. “We had to borrow some of Mrs. Easton’s skirts while our dried out. Skirts were none of these mini affairs, but came to our shoe tops or below.”

As Bernice got into her teens, the Christmases festivities became a bit more elaborate. They often went to her Aunt Lottie’s for presents, and watched with excitement as, “she would take the gifts on her arm and with a great deal of ceremony dole them out to us. This is for you, and this is for you, until she had gone around the room.” Christmas decorations were just starting to appear in rural Vermont. “I don’t think we ever had but one tree, and that was at our house. The gifts were always put on with no wraps and it made the tree look very colorful.” The tree was an ongoing source of concern. “At that time everyone used real candles and I was so afraid of fire I worried all the time they were lit.” The gifts were simple, but thoughtful. “One time Uncle Doctor gave me some left-handed shears for Christmas and another time it was a book on insects that was one of my treasures.”

When Bernice finished at Newton Academy she went on to continue her education at the Troy Conference Academy in Poultney. She spent a few years working as a teacher in some of the smaller schools around Shoreham until she married Leslie Reed in May 1915. Their daughters, Helen and Lois, married two Foster brothers and stayed in the area.

The joys and hardships of a Shoreham childhood stayed with Bernice until the end of her life. On one of her last Christmases, she presented her children and grandchildren with the special memoir she had written, given with the hope that “you all have as happy memories as I have had.” What began with a little poem also ended with one: “I’ve told things twice/And left out some I shouldn’t./I’m getting old–(you all know that)/Or else perhaps I wouldn’t.” It was the most precious Christmas gift she had to give.