

[Miss Ella Bartlett]

[?] Yankee Gentlewoman 1/9/39 No.2 Mass. 1938-9

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER LOUISE BASSETT

ADDRESS [Brookfield ?] PERU, MASSACHUSETTS

DATE DECEMBER 23, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT MISS ELLA BARTLETT

ADDRESS HINSDALE, MASSACHUSETTS

Miss Ella Bartlett does not call on people indiscriminately. When she "pays" a call, she has some purpose in mind. Formal calls are permissible without a purpose but they must be short and "formal." Therefore it is not always easy to catch Miss Bartlett. We had tried to coax her to come see us on one pretext or another to no avail. We knew better than to call on her without a purpose. Therefore we felt it a triumph when we met her at the Community Christmas Tree two days before Christmas and got her so interested in telling of [old?] times, she came in and "sat[?]" for over a half hour.

Name: Louise G. Bassett

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Brookfield

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Topic: Ella Bartlett

It was two days before Christmas and on my way home from the post-office I went around by the Common to see the town Christmas Tree and hear the church carollers welcome the Christmas season. As I stood looking and listening I thanked the good Lord that he had spared the Christmas Tree, planted three years ago by the local Parent-Teachers Association for a town Community Tree. When the September hurricane smashed and ripped and tore all before it, hundreds of our fine old elm and maples of which Brookfield is so proud , were destroyed, but “our” tree remained standing, tall and slim.

A voice beside me said, “It's a beautiful tree, isn't it? Perfectly shaped, jest right to hang lights on and not have them look higglety-pigglety, as most Christmas trees do.”

It was Miss Ella Bartlett, her arms full of bundles, who had spoken.

We listened while the voices of the carollers came across the sharp clear cold in those glorious strains of “Silent Night, Holy Night,” “Hark the Herald Angels Comes Sing .” I lingered on but the late afternoon was bitterly cold and the lure of my warm kitchen too strong. Miss Bartlett seemed to agree. We moved off slowly, listening and looking back. The singers had evidently gained full confidence in themselves and the “[welkin?] was ringing” with the sound of their voices. They sounded heavenly to me, but not so to my companion.

“Humph,” she snorted, if such a gentle lady can really snort, “that may be called singing by some but to my ears, it's 2 jest noise. Land, but it makes me think back to the days when Brookfield really had some good Christmas sings. It was right over where the post office is today that the old Town Hall stood for years and years. Every Christmas Eve, the young and the old, why most everybody who was anybody in town , would go down to the Hall for the Christmas sing. There, right there is where the Hall stood.”

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Miss Bartlett was so excited in pointing she almost dropped her bundles. "I can't understand why they tore it down."

"Well, you know how it is. The old buildings, like the old people have to go, and the new ones replace them. That's life." My reply, made just to keep the conversation going, was a faux pas indeed.

"Maybe that's what some folks think," Miss Bartlett's voice had a cutting edge. "But I can tell you I cried myself sick the day they started tearing the old Town Hall down. It was like takin' off one of my arms. They didn't need to do it either, even if it was too old to use. Why not let it stand like a monument. Heavens known's we got plenty of room here in town to put up hundreds of buildings without takin' down any one of 'em that's standin'. It wasn't a bad lookin' building, neither - red brick, looked good on the outside, had a fountain and a nice one too." (I had seen the fountain but didn't recognize it as such until some one had said "That is a fountain.")

By this time I [was?] hopping from one foot to the other to keep from becoming a solid piece of ice.

"Come in my house and get warm and tell me about the good times you used to have on Christmas Eve," I urged, and being half frozen herself, she came.

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"Of course," she chattered on. "We used to have singin' school all during the winter but for Christmas we would have extra songs and hymns. We used to always look forward to our 'Christmas Sing,' that's what we called it. Only things that were appropriate would be chosen and we'd practice for weeks on 'em - then at last the night would come.

"First, the ladies would give a supper in the Congregational Church. That started at six o'clock sharp. Usually it was a turkey supper, that bein' a special occasion. We didn't have turkey those days like we do now. Turkey was a delicacy, let me tell you. Of course, we

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had lots of church suppers during the winter but they'd be baked bean suppers, chicken pie suppers or scalloped oysters. Only on Christmas Eve would there be a turkey supper, so that made it more like an 'occasion.'

"Everything was always so good. The supper was good and so were the speeches. Some of the men always had something to say, especially the ministers. Some of 'em were real cute, too, what they said. Anyway they seemed good to us. We always tried to sit by some boy we liked especially, so's he could sort-a look after us and let me tell you, men were much more polite those days then they are now. Much more.

"They used to take off their hats when they met you on the street, and they'd give you their arm or take yours and they'd help you across the street and always be on the outside of the walk, to 4 protect you and they'd hold your coat for you and tuck in your sleeves." Miss Ella's sigh was long and gusty. "Well anyway, as I was sayin'. So many people would come to the Christmas supper that the tables would have to be set up two times, so, with everybody having their supper and the speeches, it was always at least eight o'clock before we'd get over to the Town Hall.

"The hall was always decorated with wreaths and American flags and it was all real gay and exciting. The girls always had extra nice dresses that night for it was the 'event' of the whole year and we girls would try to get a different color from what any other girl had. The older women would wear their best black grosgrain silk with mostly always some real lace around the neck and sleeves.

"We always had a piano - and a base bass viol and as many violins as they could scare up. We used to have guests, too, that could sing fine. They'd come from the nearby towns and of course, we always had a choir master. He always had a baton and he'd lead us. When he raised it we was supposed to all rise at the same time; sometimes we'd practice rising for weeks and we'd get so that when he'd hold up his baton we'd get up jest as though we was one person.

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“And then we'd sing- jest sing our very best and most always it was grand. We had one leader who'd stamp his feet and shake his baton at us and you'd think he would maybe jump on any / one of us any second. [oh?] Oh , he'd have an awful time. My father said he was sure he was only actin' but even so he made us sing better then any other leader I can remember.

“We did best, I think, with ‘When shepherds watch their flocks at night,’ at least I liked it best. We'd sing until ten 5 or ten thirty, then we'd sing “When Marshalled on the [Nighty?] [Mighty?] Plains’ - most all 'sings' ended that way - and then we'd finish with the Doxology. We were always so sorry when the 'sing' was over.

“We girls would generally come with our parents but we'd feel ashamed if some boy didn't take us home. We girls would put on our coats and fasinators and after we got fixed to go we'd try to look unconscious as we would sort-a saunter to the outside door. It was real excitin' to see all the people and the sleighs and see the horses shake their heads and hear 'em jingle their bells. The boys would be standin' outside by the door waitin' for some special girl and your heart'd be in your mouth 'till one of 'em would step up and say, ‘Can I see you safe home tonight?’

“Lots of times couples would get engaged that night. The girls would look so pretty and the snow and the gaiety and all would make you like a boy even if you didn't.

“Those were the days when people enjoyed themselves - you never heard any lad say he was ‘bored’ as you do now. Do you 'spose those people goin' around tonight singin' carols are havin' any fun? Course they ain't, they're goin' round bein' froze and catchin' their deaths of cold, maybe.” Miss Bartlett grasped her bundles more firmly and grimaced.

“You were a real community in those days, weren't you?” I asked.

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"I should say so," she was really indignant at the question[.?] "It's the automobile's fault, every stitch of it. Of course we can go more places and get there quicker, but what's the use of it all? Anyone can go to Worcester any time, any day, and it don't mean a thing.

"When I was a young girl, if we wanted to go to Worcester and were goin' to drive - as we most always did, goin' such a short distance on the train was looked upon as wicked extravagance - we'd begin makin' plans a week or two in advance. We would make a list of the things we wanted and what our neighbors wanted. Of course everybody in town knew we were goin' and almost everybody we knew would ask us to do some shopping for them. My, what a list we'd have when we finally got goin'.

"We'd start early in the mornin' and at almost every window or door that we passed as we drove on our way out of town, we'd see some one watchin' the 'Bartletts's goin' to Worcester.' It would take at least four hours to reach there for remember the roads were not what they are nowadays. But we wouldn't be tired, leastways, not us young folks, we'd be too excited.

"We always took a lunch and every now and then we'd take a sandwich and munch away on it as we went along. We'd shop, as we call it nowadays, it was 'tradin' then, until it began to grow dark and then we'd start for home, more dead than alive, but at that, all kinda quivery inside from the excitement of it all.

"We'd get home and be dog tired for a day or two, but, oh, my dear woman, that trip would last us for weeks and weeks and of course, we'd be consulted as to the 'latest' styles until some one else made the trip.

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"I was sayin' the other day to some one — don't remember who it was — that the clerks in the stores don't tell you anymore when you're buyin' something 'that's what they're wearin' in New York' or 'that's brand new, even the New Yorkers are just beginning to use them.'

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My father used to say 'You're a crazy lot of women to be following what those salesgirls tell you. Probably those things you been buyin' are old-fashioned by now in New York. How do you know what they're wearin' in New York? You haven't been there.' Maybe Father was right. He mostly always was, but anyway it gave you a wonderful feeling to have the girls all looking at your gloves or your new dress and envying you because you could say, 'It's what they're wearin' in New York.'" Miss Bartlett sighed once more. "But that's all gone now, for we can get the same thing that the New Yorkers are wearing at the very minute they're wearin' them. But what good does it do? We're not nearly so happy as we were in the 'old' days when things were slower and people had more time for good times. Take my word for it, you can blame the automobile for the whole thing. If people weren't running around in automobiles all the time spending all their time and money on 'em, we wouldn't be in such trouble all the time."

With this parting shot Miss Bartlett gathered her neatly wrapped bundles together, pulled her coat collar higher and announced she was leaving. Leave she did, after wishing me a dignified but certainly far from jovial "Merry Christmas."