

[Ella Bartlett]

Ella Bartlett - New England Gentility [On?] the Down Grade No.3 Mass. [1938-9?]

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER LOUISE BASSETT

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

DATE JANUARY 16, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT ELLA BARTLETT

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

Miss Ella Bartlett has lived in the town of Brookfield all her long life. Her family belonged to the town's aristocracy and Miss Ella's ideas are those of the land and factory owners - the gentility of a small Massachusetts town. To hear Miss Ella tell the story of Brookfield's transition from a busy mill town of the 19th century to an old-fashioned sleepy village of the 20th, is to know how the gentility felt about it. Brookfield is Ella Bartlett's town; she is proud of it and loyal to it. But she must feel that Brookfield, like Ella Bartlett herself, has come a long way from the faraway days when Ella was an adored daughter of a leading family in bustling, prosperous Brookfield.

Name Louise Bassett

Title Living Lore

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Assignment Brookfield

Topic: Ella Bartlett — New England Gentility

Miss Ella Bartlett was just coming out of the postoffice as I was going in.

“Wait a minute and I'll walk home with you.” I called out, amazed at my own forwardness. I have known Miss Ella for all of the twenty-odd years I've lived in Brookfield, but never until recently have I talked with her at any length. Even our new “friendliness” is formal and I was a bit aghast at my boldness in calling out in such a casual manner. If Miss Ella minded, she did not show it. I don't think she did mind, although she probably thought I wasn't very ladylike. Miss Ella has seemed to enjoy our recent chats although she probably will never admit it to me. There are few people who care to listen to Miss Ella's stories of the “old days” or to her opinions of the present. I have won favor because I will listen.

“Isn' t it too bad the McWilliams' are leaving town,” I said, as we started down the street. “They're such fine people and always so enthusiastic and active in town affairs. Brookfield needs more people like them, don't you think?”

“Well, I don't really know the McWilliams. Of course I always bow to both Mr. and Mrs. and I was on the church committee with her, and I called on them when they first came to town because they were my neighbors, but I can't say I know them. They always seemed nice though — really nicer than most newcomers.”

“You know Miss Ella, that's something I've wanted to ask about 2 for a long time. Out in the West where I come from people welcome ‘newcomers', as you call them, right away. But here you have to spend half your life in a town before the natives accept you. The old settlers don't seem to like anybody who wasn't born and brought up here.”

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“Well, I wouldn't say that, but of course you do have to be careful about new people comin' to town. Land, you don't know what they are or what they did before they came. In the old days, we didn't have so many new people moving in and out, that is , not among the people I knew. Of course the mill people who worked in the shoe factories, they came and went, but the old families knew each other so well. It's so much nicer when you know a persons' family and know that your family knew them and liked them, don't you think? I think it's terrible the way these young folks today go off and marry people they never heard of. The girls nowadays don't mind a bit what a young man's background is. They marry foreigners and everything, and no one seems to mind. I remember when I was a girl Emmy Smith went to Providence summers to visit her aunt, and one year when she came home she was engaged to be married. We was all excited to see what her beau looked like and we planned a great big party for the two of them when he came to visit her. Well, my land, were we surprised when he came. He was a German or Swede or something, and his folks lived in some foreign country. He was a nice looking young man 3 — tall and light-haired and kinda handsome, but after all — For myself I'd like to know more about a man's family. It's so funny the way people have changed since I was a girl”.

“I suppose Brookfield has changed a lot since then too, Miss Bartlett?”

“Changed? Why my dear you wouldn't know it was the same town at all. You know Brookfield was a great shoe-town once — there was four or five — mebbe it was six — shoe factories here. They were going all the time too. You see, they got started during the Civil War , and in the 1870's and 1880's , they was doing wonderful business. Brookfield was real lively then. Main Street was as bustling as — as — well, as Worcester is. Of course a lot smaller, but busy as could be. We had a lot of nice stores then. It wasn't like today when there's only those chain stores and the postoffice and the drug store. We had a fine dry goods stores real up-to-date, a man's outfit store, stationery stores, and I think there was three drug stores. And we had a grand [millinery?] store too. I can remember my father saying that the woman who ran the [millinery?] store told him she made over three

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hundred dollars in one week, one time, and that some weeks was even better. Everyone in town went to her to get their hats made. And hats were expensive in those days — with plumes and veils and flowers. You didn't buy one for two dollars like some folks do today. When you bought a hat, it was a nice hat and it would last.

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Most folks had their hats made over mebbe half a dozen times with new feathers and flowers and things.

“We were a real dressy town in those days. There was a lot of strangers came to town and they always used to say how nice the Brookfield women dressed. The main road from Worcester to Springfield ran right through the center of town then, and the two hotels were always full. Then too, people used to drive over here from Spencer and places like that on a Sunday to have dinner at the hotel. It was quite a treat. Brookfield was awful busy in those days.”

“You'd never believe it today. What happened?”

“What happened?” Ella's eyes snapped and her little figure stiffened as she answered in a colder voice than I have ever heard her use, and Ella's voice can be mighty cold. “What happened? Why there was a couple of those strikes. Those awful strikes”. The words came out like epithets. “Some poor fools in this town didn't know when they was well off. They weren't contented to have a decent job in the mill working for decent people. They asked for more money and they didn't want to work so many hours.”

“Well, you can't blame them for wanting to improve working conditions. After all, they had to work pretty long hours in those days and they didn't get so much money.” With every word, I was wondering if I was forfeiting a new friendship.

“They got enough money. A lot of 'em spent half they got getting drunk and acting up. They weren't workin' any longer hours than most 5 folks were in those days and they was

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used to it too, so I don't see why they got so riled up over it. But then, it wa'n't the workers' fault, that is, not all of it. There was some man who came here from somewhere — I can't recollect now where he did come from. He was Irish anyway and all the Irish who worked in the mills listened to his stories. A lot of the others listened too. It was terrible the way he got them all excited. The men who owned the mills were real nice men, real / gentlemen. They told their help they couldn't give them any more money, but this man — he was a — a — a

“Union organizer?”

“Yes, I guess that was it. He wanted them to get together in a union and he told them the men who owned the mill could pay them more money. So they went on a strike. It was a / terrible time. All those people out of work and none of 'em had much money. You know they were mill workers, the kind who aren't very thrifty and don't get ahead much. Course, I don't know much about it all except what I heard the men say. My cousin used to talk a lot about what fools the men were to be out striking and losing so much pay.”

“Did they win the strike?”

“Indeed, they didn't. They lost their jobs for good and all too. I guess nobody thought what did happen would happen. Mebbe they wouldn't a-gone on strike, if they had. Anyway, the men who owned the [mill?][mills ?] closed up tight and they was never opened again. People thought at first it was just for the time-being, and that the mills 6 would be open right away, but they never did. The men who had been [on?] strike had to leave town and get jobs in Worcester or somewhere else. It was just as good some of them went. They weren't no good to the town.”

“But Miss Bartlett, it must have been rather bad for the town to have so many people leave at once. Didn't any of the influential men in town try to settle the strike?”

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“Guess there wasn't anything could be done, though I have heard some say that the men who run the mills should have been willin' to give in a little and let the help have more money. I don't really know though, for my cousin, who knew a lot about those things, always said it was the help's faults that they was too stubborn. It did make a terrible difference in Brookfield. So many people moved away and the mill buildings just stood there idle. After awhile, some of them was torn down, others were just left to fall apart. It was terrible. I can't see why some one didn't do somethin'. They was nice buildings too, big, high ones with rows of windows all around. The people who worked in 'em always seemed contented enough to me. Many's the time I've seen the girls goin' back and forth to work in the mills arm in arm, laughing and talkin'. The men used to play games and have a lot of fun in the old pastures around the mills. I knew some of the men who worked there — and a few of the girls, though most of the girls who was in my crowd didn't go to work. They 7 stayed to home. But some of the men in our crowd used to work there bosses and skilled shoe men.”

“Brookfield never recovered from the strikes did it? When I came here over twenty years ago, I remember they were still talking about how the town wasn't what it used to be and they hoped to get more manufacturing here.”

“Well, it may not be so good for the town not to have manufacturing, but it certainly makes it a lot nicer place to live. Look at the way some of these towns around here look — Spencer and Ware — all dirt and loads of foreign people. [?] [I'd?] rather have Brookfield look the way it does. It's a pretty town, don't you think?”

“Yes, a very pretty town even after all the damage from the hurricane, but I often wonder, Miss Bartlett, what's going to become of Brookfield. McLaurin and Gavitts, (the two small factories left in town) are just keeping up. There isn't much farming. No new blood ever moves in and the young people get out as soon as they graduate from high school. What's Brookfield going to be like in a few years, if something doesn't change?”

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I expected an outburst. [instead?] Instead there was silence. I glanced to see if Miss Ella was too indignant to speak. There was an odd look in her dark eyes — but not of anger — sorrow, rather, and bewilderment. But her words were characteristic of Miss Ella keeping her chin up.

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“I guess Brookfield'll pull through. This depression and this money spending that's goin' on is enough to ruin any town. Land sakes, if they don't figger things out pretty soon down to Washington and decide what they want to do and do it, I don't know where we'll be. I never saw so much jumping around first one way and then another. My idea is to decide to do something and do it, no matter what folks think. My father always used to say, ‘Make up your mind Ella, and keep it that way.’

“There's nothing wrong with Brookfield. It just needs some of the people who used to live here. People today don't like to live in small towns anymore. They can't get settled down, have to be movin' around and seein' new things all the time. People want too much out of life today — that's why Brookfield isn't like it was once. I wish you'd known this town when I was a girl. There wasn't a better place anywhere. Nice people lived here then. They were proud of the town and kept it up. Now they don't care a snap. The other day there was a couple of children — little boys — playin' that football game over to the common. I heard one say, ‘Gee, say ain't this somethin', you can kick your football thirty yards without hittin' a tree’, and the other one said ‘You couldn't do that before the hurricane!’ Can you imagine, little children not being brought up to feel bad when our beautiful trees are ruined. What's wrong with Brookfield is that it hasn't enough people who have — who have — (I thought for a horrible moment Miss Ella was going to say “guts”) who have — gumption”.