

Library of Congress

[Mrs. Cruickshank #1]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in

New England

TITLE Berkshire Hill Town Farm Wife -#1

New Marlborough

WRITER Wade Van Dore

DATE 2/21/39 WDS. PP. 12

CHECKER DATE

SOURCES GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS

2/28/39 Mrs. Cruickshank - Berkshire Hill Town Farm Wife Paper One W. Mass. 1938-9

STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Wade Van Dore

ADDRESS New Marlborough

DATE OF INTERVIEW February 21, 1939

SUBJECT Living Lore

Library of Congress

NAME OF INFORMANT Mrs. Cruickshank

ADDRESS New Marlborough

The old road winds half-forgotten over the hills; once it carried good traffic of wagons going to mill and carriages going to church. A thriving business went over it a century ago, and the large frame houses beside it held big families.

One of these old houses, still standing in good condition and little changed externally at least, is known as the Chase place. It stands in dignity and beauty back from the dirt road, across a smooth green lawn. Nearer the road - practically beside it, in fact - and to one side so that it does not obstruct a view of the older house, stands a smaller, very ordinary red frame house perhaps sixty years old. In this house Mrs. Cruickshank was born, the last of the local line of Chases. She was the only child, and to her came the fine old homestead and farm. Not so very long ago - ten years ago, no more - she and her husband sold the entire place to city people, who kindly allowed them to stay on and live as if it were still their own. But when the new owners were separated by death the farm had to be sold again, and this time with less fortunate results.

This explanation is necessary in an account of Mrs. Cruickshank. Her life and personality have been tempered by the spaciousness and grace of her surroundings. If she lacks the mannerisms of an aristocrat at least she has a true lady's sense of what is seemly, good, and proper. She speaks maliciously of no one, though she is interested in all gossip as country people usually are. She is generous and kind.

Physically she is slight, not very tall, with the angularity of a hard-working Yankee farm woman. She is wiry and quick, and very spry - even at 60 she thinks nothing of a five mile walk to call on her friends, the young writers, and their small child whom she admires so much.

Library of Congress

Her household is a neat and happy one, and she is a good mother -in-law to her son's wife and her daughter's husband, while her home is always open to "Donal's" fiancée. There never seems to be any bickering or undercurrent of ill will such as is found in many of the hill homes. The grown children are all nice-looking and intelligent. Mr. Cruickshank is weather-burned and stocky, slow-spoken but firm in all ways. The family as a whole show Mrs. Cruickshank more respect and consideration than is usual in the district, although on the other hand she is not pampered. She doesn't milk the cows - but she can and 3 does feed the horses or the chickens if everyone else is busy or away. On holidays there are gifts and plants for her; she is taken out to ride or "to the pictures" (movies) and is taken shopping for new clothes.

In her speech Mrs. Cruickshank is given to folk-expressions and colloquialisms but not to ignorance. She reads and writes but her life has been too full for much indulgence in story-books. She continues a life-time correspondence with an old school friend and once a year has this friend to visit her.

"Yes, indeed I have - I've lived on this place all my life," said Mrs. Cruickshank cheerfully in answer to my question. "Grampa built this house for my father when he was married, and I was born here. Then later when I married Ben[?] Papa was alone so I couldn't go away and leave him, so we just stayed right here. I was the only one he had. I didn't have any sisters or brothers - just a lone chick, as they tell about. And sometimes Papa was a trial for Ben too, but I will say that Ben was always right good to Papa. Thought maybe I'd have only one baby too - it was eight years after Dorothy was born that Junior came, and then four years before our Donal' came. So we finally had quite a family after all."

"But what about the big house," I asked, motioning toward the fine old building set back from the road, its ancient clapboards weathered to a silky grey and enhanced by light green shutters and lilac bushes beside the door. "Didn't you ever want to live over there?"

Library of Congress

“Land sakes, no! We liked the little house. It has been plenty big enough for us. Gracious, I just wouldn't know how to act rattling around in that great place, and having to keep it clean. I declare it's hard enough to clean this one,” and she sent an apologetic glance toward the dark red painted house set close beside the road in near proximity to the great barn, as if to imply that she didn't keep even the smaller house clean enough. “No, and I never slept in the old house but one 2 night in my life, and that was to keep company with the Doctor's wife when she was there alone once. Mercy, but it did seem strange sleeping there - so near to my own bed in the other house. It's no wonder Mrs. Barell won't keep the place now that He's gone. And I wouldn't be s'prised if she needed the money too, as much as we needed money when we sold it to them, ten years ago when times were so hard for us. But we never expected they would sell it as long as we were here. It didn't seem like we were selling to them, though, because they just let us stay on the same as always, with our stock and all. We cut the hay every year, and sold firewood and had our truck garden and they never asked a thing of us but to open up the house and make a fire sometimes, or take care of the water pipes. Ben put in the bathroom and kitchen pipes for them, but the Doctor paid him for the work, and said long as he was doing it he might as well put water in my kitchen too. I tell you I've blessed him many times for that faucet in my sink.”

“Do you know what you'll be doing now, or where you'll go?” I asked, for I had heard that the Doctor's wife had just recently sold the property to a young couple from Hartford.

“No, that we don't. But I don't see how we can stay here. Why the new people want us to pay fifteen dollars a month rent, and Ben to work eighteen hours a week besides, taking care of their riding horses.”

“I think they're Jews,” drawled Ben as he came up just then from his work in the barn, joining us as we walked into the lamp-lighted 3 house from the deepening dusk of the yard. “That young feller tells me every time he sees me that he got cheated on this place. He even got a surveyor up to go over the lines, and says to him that he wanted enough

Library of Congress

extra land offen it to pay the cost of surveryin'. But the surveyin' [fella?] says back to him, 'just who do you expect me to steal this land from, anyhow?' So I guess it didn't get surveyed. Another day he started walkin' over the line, with me to show him the way, an' we weren't half through when he was ready to call quits. Why he's got more land here now than he knows what to do with. Can't ride horses in them woods. Lawn too big now to keep mowed. Says they're goin' to keep sheep on the lawn! City folks!"

"Yeh, Jim come up t'other day," says blond, nice-looking Donald, entering the conversation, "an asked Mr. Bell if he could have the hay in that field next to his place. 'Why, is that my field?' says Mr. Bell. 'I didn't know that b'longed t' me. What'll you give me for it?' I almost laughted right out, an' I guess Jim was s'prised too. All the hay fields hereabouts growin' into brush, an' he wants to sell his hay!"

"I never see the like before," resumes Ben, wagging his head. "If they hain't Jews, I don't know what they be. I told him right out as how he got a bargain on the place, an' I happen to know he's already been offered a thousan' dollars more than what he paid for it."

4

"I don't care if they are Jews - Jews can be just as nice as other people, I expect," asserted his wife. "But it is too bad that they are carryin' on so! You can't feed a dog hay, and Mr. Bell will find he can't treat country people like as if they were so many garden weeds if he expects to get along in the country - gracious no!"

"Are they up now?" I asked in the expression used by natives concerning part-time residents. City people are "up" when living in their country houses; when they have returned to town we say they have "gone down."

"No, they aren't here," answered Mrs. Cruickshank, "but the old lady, Mrs. Bell's mother, is over at the house, and she is really awful nice. Not a bit smart and sassy like the young ones. I guess they don't treat her awful good either. She is German or Swedish or from one of those countries. Talks kinda foreign-like. She's friendly to us and it seems real

Library of Congress

nice to have a neighbor so near. I do get some woman-hungry, I must say. And now one reason I'll hate to move is that I'll miss her. But maybe we can stay close by. Why, I'll even miss this old road! 'twon't seem the same if we live on a better one some 'ere. Goodness, when I remember all the times I walked up and down this road, going to school when I was a little girl, down the hill to the schoolhouse. That's a an tique shop now, or whatever they call those places. The rich New York people down there have put a big sign on it anyhow. I used to walk those two miles down there, no matter how cold or hot it was - and 5 the snow seemed deeper then than we have it now. Dorothy and Junior went to school there too, and Donal' went through the grades. But they started the bus to town when he went to high school. I'm glad one of mine went to high school. Graduated too, with a prize for chemistry. I never did know much about that." She sighed, remembering again the family's present search for a new place to live. "Eyah, it never rains but it pours, as the man says." The expression "eyah" is breathed more than spoken, on an incoming breath, and I wonder if it is a direct descendant of the old English "aye". When quoting a proverb she always qualifies it with "as they tell about" or "as the man says."

There was a little silence, and then Mrs. Cruickshank reported in rather awe-stricken tones, "You know how proud the Doctor was of those old clapboards on the big house? He knew - I told him - that they were the original clapboards, more than a hundred years old, and never been painted. So he got some oil of same kind from some'eres to have 'em treated and preserved, and had the men folks help to put it on. An' now these new owners talk about painting the house white! After all these years, when it's been so pretty and different and everybody has admired it so!"

Even I was flabbergasted by this bit of news. It was hard to visualize the stately old building in glistening white, and I said so in sympathy, but my hostess's sorrow seemed almost impersonal so far as the house itself was concerned. Again I spoke of their moving.

Library of Congress

"Perhaps you will be able to get a house with a bathroom," I suggested[.?] I knew this to be one of her dearest wishes. Her face lighted at once.

"Yes, I've thought of that," she exclaimed. "Look, I'll show you the kind of bathroom I'd like," and she reached for a large, well-worn mail-order catalogue. "Ain't this a purty one?" and she pointed out a creation in orchid colored tile. "But I guess we'll be lucky just to get a house, almost any kind of a house, even. Ben has been down to see the Foresters' place. The man is in jail for six years for killing another man, and his wife went to stay with her daughter, so the house is empty. 'tisn't in very good repair, 'cause once when they got drunk they started a fire in it. You can still see burnt places on the floors and walls. But Dorothy said she'd help us paint 'n' paper it. There's no water in the kitchen, but a spring runs into a little hall, like."

"I'll miss you when you move," I said to the family as I bid them goodnight, pitying their homelessness, their sense of loss, and their incredulous disillusionment in the hard-boiled city folk.

When next I saw them it was in their new home. For they did take the Foresters' house.

"It's a lot different from our old place," remarked Mrs. Cruickshank cheerfully, after I had casually inspected the rooms, upstairs and down. "But I'm getting used to it bit by bit. It's lots lighter, and the rooms are larger, and the boys have even put a faucet in the kitchen. I think it looks quite nice with the new paper and paint, 7 and Dorothy bought me these curtains. Seems I haven't seen you for a long time. Mrs. Bell's mother comes down for milk almost every day, and she tells me she sees you sometimes. She brought me some of the plants I'd left in the dooryard, now wasn't that nice of her? I was so busy movin' I couldn't take 'em up, and even had to leave the white vi'lets Donal's girl gave me last year on Mother's Day. So the old lady brought 'em down to me. I guess her folks don't like it 'cause she gets milk here and likes to see me. But land sakes, the poor old lady is lonesome alone by herself most of the time. I hear tell they are fixin' our house for her to

Library of Congress

live in. If that's what they wanted why didn't they say so? Telling us they could rent it to someone they knew for fifteen dollars a month and eighteen hours of work a week! Now they are putting in a bathroom and everything. I'm glad, though, fer I liked the old lady from the start. She is real nice - and did she tell you about livin' in Germany during the war?"

"Yes, she did. What else have you learned about our new neighbors?" I inquired.

"Oh, dear me! they are up to all kinds of mischief. Horses ruining the lawn that Ben spent so much time on making nice, - and you can smell the horse dung all over the place. An' the hired man runs around with the country girls even if he is married and has three children. An' that nursemaid don't look like much to me, either. They had one of Polish Tom's girls in to help with the house-cleaning, and 8 the next day Mrs. Bell went down and accused her of stealing five dollars from the nursemaid's purse. Tom was so mad and upset - you know how honest and good and hard-working the whole family is - that he order poor Mary never to go there again. Dear me, it's a pity, 'cause Mary really is such a nice girl. Then some hunters staying down at Bill Thompson's shot one of the Bells' goats - leastwise so they say - and the Bells had state troopers all up and down the road trying to find out who did it. And both the Bells have stopped the different summer people on the road and asked them to call. Imagine! You know how the summer people are, around here - friendly enough with everybody, but no great shakes at going to each other's houses. Mostly all old people too, wanting to be quiet. But these young ones seem to want to have a real noisy place with dancing and bridge games and all that. I guess mebbe they'll find they've come to the wrong place. And they're pretty mad 'cause the people from the big houses haven't come to see them - they can't understand why the same folks are friendly with that young couple of writers living down the road in that old shack they fixed up. 'Well,' mebbe it's 'cause those two've got some brains,' I told Mrs. Bell's mother, land I think you'd like them too.' So I took her down there, and the young lady was just awful nice to that poor old thing, nicer than her own daughter is - and of course her daughter was mad about that, too. They're mad at themselves, those folks, if you ask me."

“Evidently they belong to that wide class of people known as the vulgar rich.” I ventured.

“I guess mebbe so,” assented Mrs. Cruickshank. “Though the young lady certainly has nothing to be so set up about - I don't know much about Mr. Bell. But the old lady told me herself that she did housework to support her young ones - and now since her daughter married a man with a little money she's been so stuck up you'd think she'd always been rich. But mebbe that's just her way of getting even. Mebbe other girls used to turn up their noses at her! But isn't it a pity she didn't have sense enough to know what a fine person her mother is in spite of doing scrubbing and washing for folks? She sure has no call to be ashamed of that old lady.

“It's like Donal's girl being ashamed of his uniform. You know he's a chauffeur now for the Tallmans. They bought him a nice uniform and cap and I want him to have his picture took in it. He looks real handsome, I think. But Helen, his girl, doesn't like it at all. I can't understand why not. She's a maid herself for some folks south of here - and her mother works for summer folks. Nothin' to be ashamed of in good honest work, is there?”

Of all the people she is talking about, Mrs. Cruickshank herself is perhaps the truest aristocrat. The best blood in the section, that of generations of pioneers and landed gentry, is accumulated and concentrated in her thin old veins. It is rather pathetic to see her 10 so defiant against the false standards of interlopers. As we talked she moved quickly about her large kitchen which also serves aa dining room at one end. She was pouring milk into bottles.

“I want you should take home some of this milk for the little boy,” she said. “Land sakes, I wish I had something nicer to send him. I don't know what we'd do without milk. We've lots to be thankful for, I guess. Always something good about everything - only sometimes you have to look for it with glasses on.

Library of Congress

"D'you want any of these magazines?" she went on. "Donal' brought 'em home from Tallmans', an' I'll never read 'em all. I like the pictures an' some of th' stories. But don't they have fancy cooking pictures! My, it's all I c'n do t' peel potatoes three times a day. I guess the folks that write these receipts don't mean 'em for a body that has to pick her own berries, wash milk pails, an' weed a garden, an' can stuff, besides washin' and ironin' and cleanin'."

I looked over the magazines and selected several to take away. Among them were copies of the New Yorker.

"What do you think of these magazines," I asked, holding one of them up for her to see.

"Good lands! I don't see much sense to them - I don't for a fact!" she exclaimed. "But then, if other folks do, I s'pose they're all right. I guess there's lots in the world I don't understand - I know enough to know that, at least," she laughed. "My motto is it's 11 better to be ignorant than to think you know too much. Gracious! I hope I never get like old Mr. Moss down the road. He's so stiff and set in his ways I do believe it's hard for him to go around a bend in the road! Why only last week when I walked down to chapel, I followed his tracks in the snow, and for the whole two miles they did not once cross from one side of the road to t'other. I couldn't help but notice because I had t' cross back and forth a number of times to keep out of mud holes, but Mr. Moss's tracks never turned once."

"Didn't it tire you - walking all that distance? And up and down hills, too?" I asked.

"Land sakes no! - or mebbe being tired means somethin' different to me than it does to other folks. Did I ever tell you that I never been sick - never except for when the children came, and that always seems different somehow, b'cause you're getting something for your trouble. An' I will say it wasn't as hard for me, havin' my babies, as 'tis for some. Ben says I'll outlive the whole family - just dry up finally and blow away. Mebbe I've been so well 'cause I've kept so busy.. Guess I've just never had time to be sick."

Library of Congress

“That's one way to live,” I said. “But what would happen to the poor doctors if everyone was like you?”

For a moment Mrs. Cruickshank laughed at this question, then she answered:

“Well, I do believe they would have to be their own patients. An' if they could not make a living in such a way, they would have to hustle and find some other kind of work.”

12

The afternoon had been spent in talk, and now the men were coming in from their chores to listen over the radio to their favorite adventure serials. I know this to be a daily custom, never interrupted, so considered it a good time to leave. Mrs. Cruickshank pressed upon me the two quarts of rich creamy milk and promised to come down soon to spend a day with us. The hill road held only shadows and sunset glow as I walked home upon it.