

Growing up in Rye in the 1890's – First Hand Account

In response to my request for an interview in 1973, Emma Foss wrote a letter to me instead, describing her childhood memories of Rye in the 1890's. It is a priceless recollection of a time long ago, on the cusp of the modern era. (Emma was born in 1882 and died in 1978; she lived in the family home on Central road, a half mile from the center. Her original hand written letter may be seen at the town museum.)

“On Sundays we walked to church mornings and evenings. Other people walked who lived much further from the church than we did. But there were sheds near the church where horses and carriages could be left during the service. Children had fewer toys and games than they have now, but we invented games that seem to me, even now, remarkably ingenious. Grocery stores, not being as accessible as they are now, we bought our groceries in large quantities. There were five people in our family and we bought flour by the barrel. We had very few of the conveniences that people consider necessities now but we were happy in spite of our deprivations.

The one room school in Rye that I attended served boys and girls from six years of age through fifteen. It was 1890 and I was eight years old when I first entered school. My mother had been teaching me at home and I could read almost anything when I started school. I remember running across the road from my home to tell my great grandfather that I knew how to do long division. I happened to be at his house one day when he was planning to drive (with a horse and wagon of course) to Rye Center, a quarter of a mile away. He said that I might go with him which I did. But I still remember how very embarrassed I was to be so very far from home without a hat. I must have been about seven at the time.

Our family always had a horse and wagon and in winter we used a sleigh or pung as there was always snow in the road and everywhere. We drove into Portsmouth at rare intervals to shop. In winter it was a long, cold drive. We were dressed as warmly as possible, but by the time we reached home we were thoroughly chilled and mother made us drink hot ginger tea in spite of my stubborn resistance. I do not think my resistance was so much due to the distaste for ginger tea as to the fact that I was half asleep at that time and objected to being bothered. We went everywhere with our parents, baby sitters not having been invented at that time. In any case I doubt if our parents would ever have left us with baby sitters. Children usually walked to school and remained there during the noon hour. Girls carried luncheons in boxes or baskets, boys in pails.

There was great excitement in Rye during the years of the presidential elections. In Portsmouth there were torch light processions in which Rye men, including my father, participated. The marchers wore colorful costumes which added to the glamour. Crowds lined the sidewalks, enjoying the spectacle. By the time I had entered school that custom had been discontinued. But we shared our parent's interest in politics. At school we repeated political slogans, felt pity for the benighted ones who belonged to the other party and rejoiced in our enlightenment.

In Rye most of the citizens were totally unconcerned with the resort community. But once or twice during the summer, our father took us in the evening to one of the hotels, the Farragut or the Wentworth. We sat outside and through the long windows and open doors we watched beautifully gowned ladies and gentlemen dancing. And we listened to the music which was the biggest thrill of all.”