VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

And isn't this a winter? Makes me think of some of the weather we had when I was a little girl. Not all of them, of course, were as cold and snowy as this, but I know some of them were. It wasn't just because I was small, and the snow seemed deeper than it really was because my legs were short, either. Snow to the waist, even on a four or five-year-old, is still a couple of feet in depth.

And cold. In the house where I grew up there was a thermometer screwed onto the window casing outside the living room on the northwest corner of the house. It was attached just beyond the big wooden-framed storm window that hooked into place each fall and came off for storage in the shed each spring. I have seen minus 20°F registered on that thermometer for an entire week, day and night. The mercury seemed frozen at that level.

It was so cold, one winter, that a friend and I walked to Cotuit over the salt-water ice. For safety's sake, each of us carried an oar for we knew salt-ice is treacherous. We also knew we shouldn't have been out there on the bay, no matter how cold it had been, or how thick the ice was. Had our parents known of that escapade, at the time, I'm certain we'd both have been punished, not only for disobeying but because we'd been foolish and knew better.

That was the winter Nantucket Sound froze entirely; not just Nantucket Harbor and along the shores; there was no open water at all in the Sound. Nothing but ice as far as the eye could see. Food and emergency medical supplies were airlifted to the island that year, too.

Today whenever we have a snowstorm of several inches, all the schools close. I don't remember that ever happening in all the twelve years I attended Barnstable Schools. It was unthinkable children, unless they were sick or there was a holiday, wouldn't go to school, Monday through Friday, from nine in the morning 'til three in the afternoon. We went to school just as our fathers went to work. Nor was there bus service to elementary schools; we walked. Only youngsters in grades 7 through 12 were carted to school, for after completing the sixth grade, all students went to Hyannis.

We called the lower grades Grammar Schools, back then. Osterville's had four classrooms above an open basement; it was the front section, facing West Bay Road at the corner of First Avenue, that now houses Cape Cod Academy. First and sixth grades had separate rooms, each with about 20 to 25 youngsters; but second and third grades, and fourth and fifth grades shared a room. And one teacher. While pupils in one class were occupied with their workbooks, the teacher did oral work with those in the other.

Learning to concentrate while something else was going on around us was a lesson we learned young. The two classes shared music, art, physical education, and such entertaining sessions as story-telling and book-reports. Our teachers, it seemed, could manage classes as large as 45 or 50, even with two age-levels in one room. Our Principal also taught sixth grade. It's remarkable, I suppose, that we learned to read and write!

Whenever there was a snowstorm of major proportions, we'd hear the plows come through in the night, rumbling along the roads, pushing the snow to the sides. The plows ran all night and, in the morning, men and older boys (who were excused from school for the purpose) would shoulder their shovels and congregate in the center of the village. They'd shovel snow into huge piles, clearing the sidewalks and curbs completely, making it safe within a few hours to walk into the newsstand, grocery, drug store and post office.

When the heaps of snow were big enough, a dump truck would come along. The piles would be transferred into the truck (again, by men wielding shovels), and trundled down to the foot of Bay Street where the snow was deposited at the shore. By the end of the day the boys came home with rosey and wind-burned cheeks and money in their pockets.

Although we had radios in those days, we never heard any broadcasts of pleas to help clear snow from around fire hydrants because there weren't any fire hydrants. There wasn't any town water supply. Everyone had a well and an electric pump in the cellar or the pump house. Fire was fought with a pumper that carried water to the fire and that could also pump from whatever nearby source of water could be found. If none could be found and the supply in the pumper was used up, the blazing structure simply burned to the ground.

At the sound of the fire siren, however, all the bigger boys and younger men in the village rushed to the scene as fast as they could. Some would chop a hole in the ice of a pond if it were winter and if there were a pond nearby. Some would stretch hose. Some would beat at the flames with whatever utensils were at hand, and others would carry buckets of water until the pumper could start fighting the fire.

The fire alarm was coded to indicate the location of the fire or other emergency, and every resident was supplied with a card to explain the signals. One blast meant help was needed for some purpose other than a fire. Two whistles indicated a fire on Main Street; three, Wianno Avenue; four, Parker Road, and so forth. If the siren sounded seven times, that meant the fire was out-of-town, usually in Marstons MIlls or Santuit or, perhaps, especially in the springtime when forest fires often ravaged large acreages, in the Mashpee woods.

There were no paid firemen nor did the men who responded to alarms receive money for their assistance. It was a true mutual-aid effort on a strictly voluntary basis. Uncontrolled fires were an enemy common to all and everyone who could turned-to when needed. Even women and children could participate in bucket brigades and did.

Just as it is now, fire was more likely to strike in winter; coal, wood and kerosene stoves heated houses. Central heating systems were by no means universal. Accidents and chimney fires were frequent. Even in warmer months there were fires, for kitchen stoves burned summer and winter; the women cooked hot meals whether the temperature was zero or 90°, and a chimney sooted-up with creosote can catch fire any time of year.

While this is a winter to write-home-about, it's not unique. My grandmother told stories of winter snows so deep that after the lanes were plowed, the horse-drawn sleighs came along and although you could hear the sleighbells, you could see neither horse nor vehicle for the plowed snow was high enough to hide them from view.

Can't you imagine how it must have been? The snow heaped up all along the narrow lane, the horse trotting smartly and tossing its mane in the clear air, the sleighbells sounding their happy tinkling notes, and the people riding behind, well-bundled under buffalo robes and breath steaming in the frosty air, enjoying their outing?

No sand or salt spewed on the roads to make it dirty. No autos traveling about. The only air pollution coming from the chimneys of the scattering of houses clustered around the little country stores, and each village separated from its neighbor by a mile or two or woodland.

And folks getting around, in wintry weather, in sleighs!