

Going to School in Winter

Winters at Grand Traverse Lighthouse were very harsh. Especially for small children going back and forth to school. The Nor'easters blowing in over Lake Michigan were extremely bitter and brought with them a good deal of snow and drifting which made walking very difficult.

In the dead of winter, we never saw the lighthouse in the daylight, except on weekends. On weekdays we were roused out of our warm beds in the morning around 4:30 or 5:00 o'clock. We had to get up early as there were seven of us all going to school at the same time and we had to take our turns getting washed up in the wash basin in the sink. Water for washing up was supplied by a pitcher pump which pumped rainwater from the cistern underneath the house. To this we added hot water from the tea kettle or the reservoir attached to the back end of the stove. After washing up we girls got dressed next to the coal heater in the parlor.

Ma always served us a hearty lumberjack breakfast with consisted of fried eggs, fried potatoes, flap jacks and oatmeal. When we were finished eating, we got into our outdoor clothing. Almost every morning, however we had to search for brother Leon's stocking cap. When his cap was found we were out the door into the cold and dark carrying our lantern with us.

One winter the boys fastened an old doghouse to the big green sled and the two smallest girls, Grace and Janet, rode inside with the lantern and kept fairly warm. At least they were out of the wind, and the lantern did give off heat. We never once thought of the consequences should the sled tip over and the doghouse catch on fire.

We walked about three quarters of a mile to the bus driver's farm to catch the bus. Often when we arrived, we were chilled to the bone and caked with snow. We girls usually got on the bus immediately or waited in the farmers' warm kitchen while the boys footed around out in the snow or helped the driver pump water into the trough to water the horses. Then the team was harnessed and hitched to the sleigh.

The sleigh had two sets of runners on top of which was fastened an enclosure consisting of a wooden frame covered in black canvas. There were small stationary glass windows along the sides, a door with a window in the back and two narrow sliding doors in the front with a small hole through which the reins passed. Seats ran along both sides facing each other.

The floor was covered with straw on which hot bricks and soapstones wrapped in burlap were placed. The brick and soapstones were heated all night in the oven of the farmer's kitchen range and were smoking hot by morning. There were long gray horse blankets to place over our knees.

On the way to school we could smell the scorched burlap and straw. If we smelled hot rubber, we knew all too well that our galoshes were probably bubbled up on the bottom. That meant we would be walking on big rubber bubbles until they split.

The bus driver mapped out his own route across bare fields and cherry orchards any place where the snow wasn't too deep and there wasn't too much drifting. The roads were unplowed

so it made little difference where he drove the horses. The route differed from day to day as the winter landscape changed. Even so, the bus would often capsize, and everybody would pile out and the bigger kids would help the driver right it again. There never seemed to be any casualties except one time a boy's head went through one of the glass windows. He was cut about the head and face. He laughed and made light out of his ordeal, so the driver figured he did it on purpose and showed him no sympathy. Each morning the town kids would be waiting to see which buses were late thereby deducing which ones had tipped over that day.

We carried our lunches which consisted of sandwiches, sweets and an apple. On very rare occasions, like Christmas, an orange might replace the apple. Oranges were not very plentiful in those days. Ma made our sandwiches from homemade bread which we thought branded us as poor kids, so we conveniently forgot them on the bus. If we did bring our lunches to school they were left in the hall and were usually frozen at lunch time, so we tossed them in the wastepaper basket. Doug would go to the store and buy a chunk of cheese to eat, and Janet and I would get store bought chocolate covered marshmallow cookies, charged on-Pa's bill and have those for our lunch.

After a long tiresome day in school, we boarded the bus around 3:30 in the afternoon. It all depended on how fast the bus got loaded as to when we would put away from the school. The trip home was hardly without incidence. Some kids would be singing, joking and laughing. Others cold, cranky and argumentative. There were kids coughing and sneezing and wiping their noses on their coat sleeves. Some would be vomiting, some with diarrhea, others unable to control their bladders and all bawling because they were ill and had soiled their clothing- what a stench. You surely knew it wasn't a perfume factory!

The best part of the day was to see the lamplight in the kitchen window and to anticipate a hot nourishing meal. The small kids were sometimes too exhausted to eat and their heads would fall into their dish so they were hurried off to bed. Seems as though you had to sleep fast in those days as morning came early.