**Before Factories: Life on the Farm**

Close your eyes for a minute and try to remember what you did before coming to school this morning. What time did you get out of bed? How did you know when to get up? You probably washed your face, dressed, combed your hair and grabbed a bite to eat. Maybe you even watched a bit of television, or listened to the radio while brushing your teeth. Nothing special - just the usual morning routine.

Did you ever stop to think about what life might have been like before clocks and indoor plumbing? Before factories, plastic, and brightly colored combs? Most of what we take for granted today didn’t exist 170 years ago. In 1820 there were few clocks, and no cars or televisions. Nobody had ever heard of television, and the invention of the computer was years away. Girls and boys growing up in America before the Industrial Revolution lived in a very different world.

Farm and Family

If you had grown up in 1820 you probably would have lived on a farm. On the farm, families worked long and hard growing crops and raising animals. Most of what they grew and raised was used to feed and clothe the family. Some things were traded with neighbors for tools and supplies, or in exchange for help in the fields. Most farming families were large. It was not unusual for a child to grow up with six, eight, or even ten brothers and sisters. Children were needed to help with farm work. They were taught at a young age what chores were expected of them. Children learned quickly that they had to work for the family to survive. Chores left unfinished could mean less food on the table, or fewer clothes for the winter. Both boys and girls contributed to life on the farm in different, but equally important ways.

Sunup to Sundown: Following the Four Seasons

Life on the farm ran according to the sun and seasons. The day began at sunrise and ended at sundown. Without electricity to light the home, nightfall meant bedtime. Some chores were done year round, others changed with each season. In early spring, with snow still on the ground, New England families tapped maple trees for sugar. Later, fields were plowed and crops planted. Spring was the time to clean house too. Carpets were taken up and beaten, floorboards scrubbed, curtains washed, and stoves scoured. Last year’s spring clothes were brought down from the attic and altered to fit new bodies. Winter clothes were mended, washed, and tucked away until the next frost. Spring was also the season when the long task of making cloth began.

Summer was spent preparing for the long winter. The hay harvest began in July and continued until all the hay was stored safely in the barn. From May through October long hours were spent in the kitchen preserving fruits and vegetables to store for winter.

Fall brought the harvest. Corn was picked and potatoes dug up and stored. Grains like wheat and barley were taken to a grist mill and ground into flour. Animals were slaughtered, smoked, and hung in the cellar or smokehouse. By the end of fall the pantry shelves were lined with jars of fruits and vegetables, nuts and berries. In the cellar barrels of flour, bags of potatoes, dried fish and meat, and pots of honey could be found. All of this food was needed for the winter when it would be almost impossible to get new food.

Days grew shorter and nights colder. Again, the house was cleaned from top to bottom in preparation for the cold days ahead.

Tasks changed with the approach of winter. More time was spent indoors. Men and boys rose early to break ice from the pump, haul water, and feed the animals. Older boys were sent out to free livestock from snow drifts and ice. Women and girls tended the fire, cooked meals, made soap and candles, and cared for children. Many hours were spent spinning yarn and weaving cloth. Stories and songs were shared on cold winter evenings around the fireplace. Those who could, read books and newspapers aloud to others. A young girl might be found stitching a sampler. A boy might whittle wooden figures or pegs.

School Days

Winter was the one season during the year when not all the children were needed on the farm at all times. Those who were lucky were allowed to go to school. Some communities had their own one-room school house. Other communities held classes in a church or family home. Students as young as four and as old as twenty were sometimes taught together by one teacher. It was often difficult to find a teacher. Some students knew almost as much as their teacher. School lasted about eight weeks. Illness and poor weather caused unexpected school closings. Some children missed school because they were needed at home. Children who could not go to school were taught in the home.

Life on the Farm: Good Times and Bad

The farmhouse was the center of activity for both adults and children. Though work took up a lot of time, people found time to play. Work itself was often festive. Families joined together to build barns and houses. Women shared news and stories while piecing together quilts. Spring brought neighbors together for maple sugaring. The fall harvest was another opportunity for people to gather and help one another. Music, dance, sharing food, and storytelling all helped to lighten the work load. Despite the festive times, farming the rocky soil of New England was very difficult. Large families and limited land meant only one or two sons might inherit a piece of land. There were few choices for the other children. Many children left the farm when given the chance. Jobs created by New England’s new factories in the early and mid 1800s attracted many in search of a better way of life.

Resource:

<http://www.uml.edu/docs/farmtofactory_tcm18-88383.pdf>