COMMUNITY

In 1850s, boys played at recess; girls watched

In 1938 W.W. Dixon interviewed 91-year-old Cynthia Miller Coleman about her life in the Chester and Blackstock communities before the Civil War. At the time, Coleman was living with her daughter, Sarah Starnes, the postmistress of the town of Ridgeway.

Louise Pettus

NEARBY HISTORY

Coleman's people were Scots-Irish Presbyterians who came down from Pennsylvania before the Revolutionary War and settled on Rocky Creek in Chester County — "strict-laced, blue-stockinged Presbyterians," she told her interviewer.

Her first schooling began in 1855 in the old Covenanter brick church. It was a long day, from early morning to just before sundown. The teacher was John Chisholm. Every youngster began with the blue-backed speller, a text that was part of every American child's first schooling for more than a century.

During the one-hour recess for dinner and recreation, the boys played "town ball" and shot marbles while "the few girls in the school looked on, enjoyed, and applauded the fine plays."

While the girls weren't allowed to play or exercise at school, they did have two physical activities they enjoyed when at home. One was horseback riding, "a great diversion for the girls of our day." The other was dancing. Almost every Friday night someone in the neighborhood would have a dance with music by Tom Archer, a slave noted for his mastery of the fiddle. They danced the cotillion, the Virginia reel and "steal partners."

Coleman added that her community "would not tolerate waltzes and round dancing of any kind."

Coleman remembered well how on the first Saturday of May people came from long distances for an annual picnic that coincided with the shad run up the Catawba. The shad were saltwater fish that came up the river to spawn. Heavy with roe, the shad averaged 10-14 pounds each. The Miller family would picnic with the crowds and return home with the back of the wagon or buggy full of shad, enough for the family and all of the plantation hands through Sunday.

The Miller family had around 30 slaves and "only had" 600 acres. Coleman was careful to tell the interviewer that they were not rich plantation owners. She said that never did she see one of the slaves whipped and well-remembered her mother teaching them the Presbyterian catechism.

In 1870 she married Walter Francis Marion Coleman, "a boy in the neighborhood that I grew up with and loved all my life."

Shortly after the marriage federal troops arrived to capture her husband in order to put him on trial for Ku Klux Klan activity. Walter Coleman managed to escape to Texas and stay until the roundup of KKKs was over. The whole thing, Coleman said, was "the greatest grief of my life." When Walter returned, they moved to Blackstock in Chester County and lived there until her husband's death.

She described an annual event that occurred at the village of Blackstock as "the horseback tournament with lances." Like a number of other communities in the post-Civil War era, this was a throwback to the days of Sir Walter Scott. Horses carrying costumed knights would gallop down a long field, lance aloft, ready to spear suspended rings. Each knight had three opportunities. The maximum number of rings that could be caught was nine.

The winner gained the right to name and crown the "Queen of Love and Beauty." Coleman remembered the event as "an exciting, thrilling scene of color, and the plaudit of the populace was deafening if the ring was taken by the knight and ran down his lance."

Blackstock in the 1870s had about 100 inhabitants. She remembered that the village had a church, two policemen and six barrooms and added that, "Everybody was poor, everybody had credit, everybody played cards, (I mean the men) and everybody was happy."

To illustrate how poor the people were, Coleman said that matches were a luxury. They covered the fire with ashes overnight to save one match (matches were 25 cents a hundred).

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