

CHAPTER I

WHAT WE DID NOT HAVE

Charles Coolidge Parlin was born in Brodhead, Wisconsin, February 18th, 1872, and Daisy Blackwood was born on a farm in Washington county, near Kewaskum, Wisconsin, within a year of that date. If you will look at a map of Wisconsin, you will see that Grandfather and Grandmother were born a long ways apart and hence it is not strange that they did not meet each other for more than twenty years, and the early part of this book, therefore, deals with stories of each one separately, at a time when they were quite unconscious of the destiny which was to bring them together and to give them some fine grandchildren for whom they might write a book.

When we tell you what as children we did not have, you will think us poor indeed - and perhaps we were - but we did not know it. For we had all that other boys and girls in our communities had and more than some of the children possessed. We were contented and happy and thought we had a lot of things.

Well, what do you suppose it was we did not have? In the first place, we did not have electric lights. We had to read and play by the light of kerosene lamps. These lamps had a thick piece of cotton fabric that extended down into the oil and when the oil saturated the fabric, this wick, as the cotton fabric was called, could be ignited, the flame being protected from the wind by a large glass tube called a lamp chimney. If the wick were not cut just right, the lamp chimney would be covered with smoke and, so you see, Grandmother as a little girl

every day needed to look after the lamps, trim the wicks and polish the lamp chimneys. When Grandmother went to bed at night, instead of pressing a button to turn on an electric light, she lit a candle and carried it up to her room with her.

Grandfather can well remember when an electric light plant was first installed in his native village, for the boys thought it great sport to visit the plant and to magnetize their knives by putting them on the base of the little dynamo. The main wires were not insulated, but were carried bare up along the wall of the little wooden shed which enclosed the dynamo. So weak was the current, that the man in charge encouraged visitors to put one hand on one wire and then to touch the other wire with the other hand to get a shock, occasioning a violent twitch in the wrist, which threw the hand off the wire. This appeared great sport until one dumb bunny, wishing to magnetize his knife, laid it across the two main wires. If it had not happened that the knife had a wooden handle, the boy would have been killed. The short circuit set the building on fire and thereafter children were not admitted to the power house.

We did not have water in the house. We went outdoors to the pump and worked a handle up and down vigorously to pump water up from deep down in the earth into a pail and when the pail was nearly full, we carried it into the house. Sometimes in the Winter the pump would freeze and then it would need to be thawed out with hot water, and if we did not have water in the house to heat for this purpose, we would be forced to borrow some from the neighbors. Sometimes even in Summer

the "leathers" in the pump would become dry and the pump would have to be "primed" by pouring water into the pump. So you see we always had to be careful never to get entirely out of water. Besides, we always had something helpful to do, for Grandfather's mother was always saying, "Charley, will you get me a pail of water?"

How, you ask, did we get a drink? Well, we had a large tin dipper and we could dip this into the pail of water which always sat in the kitchen, or we could go to the pump and pump up a fresh drink of water. And how do you guess we took a bath? Well, on Saturday night we put a washtub - that is, a large wooden tub used for washing clothes - in the center of the kitchen floor, heated water on the stove and, filling the tub half full of warm water, jumped in and took a bath. That, you can readily see, was a lot of fun.

We did not have any telephones - when we wanted to talk with a neighbor, we just ran over to see him. Was that not much nicer than just to talk over a telephone?

Not having any water in the house, we had the toilet in a little building quite a ways from the house - and the less said about that the better - for that was a very unpleasant arrangement, especially in the winter when the snow was deep and it was very cold.

We did not have any movies at home and we never went to a movie down town, for there were no movies. We did not draw books from the public library because in our little towns in those days there were no public libraries. We had no buddy toys - toys in those days were flimsy things which broke when you tried to play with them. We never saw a banana

until we were getting to be real big children and we never saw a grape-fruit until after we were married.

No one had an automobile. Grandmother lived on a farm and once in a while could ride with her grandfather behind a horse to the village, which seemed then a long, long way. Grandfather lived in a village and had no horse. Everywhere he wished to go, he walked or ran; thus, you see, getting a lot of fun and exercise.

We had no radio and no phonograph - no one dreamed of any such thing. Some people had organs and some had pianos, but Grandfather did not, and all he had to make music with was a "mouth organ" into which he could blow, and a "Jew's Harp", a funny little instrument which you could hold at your mouth, varying the sound by striking a little spring with your finger. Oh, yes, he had a toy drum - and Grandfather pretty nearly forgot to tell you - in the early spring time he made himself whistles from small branches of willow trees. As musical instruments, they did not rank high, but it was fun to make them.

So, you see, you would think us very poor indeed. But, as I said before, we did not know it - we did not feel the need of many of the things which you enjoy; in fact, we did not dream such things would ever exist, and we were very, very happy without them.

(Note by Grandmother)

I have just read Grandfather's first chapter and find that the early years of our lives did not parallel very closely except in one important item. It is very true that we went without the things he

mentions and never even so much as surmised that we were poor. In fact, I did not find it out until Glenway Wescott wrote his Harper prize-winning novel - *The Grandmothers* - in 1927.

When I read this book, I was a grandmother, and it came to me with a great shock that if the Wescotts (the Towers of his book) who were among our closest and dearest friends, were as poor as that, then we too were poor. You may think it was very stupid of me not to have found that out before, but your grandfather has given you the exact reason - "we had all the other boys and girls had and more than some."