



THE SO-CALLED GOOD OLD DAYS

Permission - Reprinted from People Helping People by Pat Swinger

From the twenty-first century perspective, it's easy to romanticize life in rural America. But without the labor-saving devices that electricity now provides, everything was done with backbreaking labor. Gascosage member Ethel M. Plunkett wrote about the difficulties of carving out a life in the rugged Ozark hills before the days of electricity:

Life in earlier days amid the Ozarks was meager and often grim. Food was limited to what could be produced on the land. Each farm home had its small flock of chickens and the eggs were treated as nuggets of gold. The returns from them were used to purchase sugar, coffee and a bit of "chawin tobaccer." Fortunately the woods and fields yielded wild berries of different varieties and in abundant quantities. These were gathered by the women and children and were canned or made into jellies and jams.

Food was only cooked in warm weather as required to prevent spoilage. One visiting minister was said to remark that some of the best fried chicken he had ever eaten had met him on foot a short time previously. Houseflies were combated with little success because many homes could not afford screens. In summertime when the table was laid for a meal, plates were always inverted so this household pest would not contaminate them. These courageous people did their best for the health of their families that conditions would allow.

Local resident R.B. Thompson was interviewed in 1969 when Dixon celebrated its centennial. Like his hometown, he was one hundred years old at the time. He recalled watching his father plow with oxen and eating the cornpone his mother made in the fireplace by setting her skillet on a bed of coals and piling more coals on the lid. Lessons were read by "grease light," a wick placed in a dish of animal fat. The school year only lasted three or four months a year when work on the farm allowed it. As a younger man, he and his brother provided the merry-go-round for Dixon's picnics in the park. The ride was steam driven and had its own music coming from an organ played mechanically by a leather belt hooked to the engine. "It took five wagons to haul the ride," he said, "and another team just for the engine which was on wheels." He reported making \$200 with it in one day at a time when people were glad to work for 50¢ a day.

When interviewed for a 1968 article in the Rural Electric Missourian, long-time Dixon resident W. A. Grempczynski, age eighty, recalled the days before electricity: "I remember three kinds of lights in our store," he said, referring to the large dry goods store his family operated for fifty-six years. His father died when he was in eighth grade and he started working full time. "The lights we had then were coal oil. They made a reddish light and they smoked so much they had to be cleaned every other day. When we got gaslights we thought that was a great improvement because they gave a much brighter, clearer light and all we had to do for them was pump them up with air every day, fifteen minutes or so of work. Of course, when we got electricity, then we knew what seeing and convenience really was."



Work on the farm meant backbreaking labor. Eventually electricity made many tasks much easier. Photo courtesy of Rural Missouri.

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