

## A Vernon Center Childhood By Jean Kanter Klothe



*Editor's Note: Jean Kanter Klothe was born in Vernon and lived in the area before moving to New York City in 1932.*

*Her charming memoir describes the changing seasons in Vernon Center when it was a farming community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

I was born, at home, in Vernon Center on October 13, 1908. My parents, Esther Liebman and Benjamin were married in Romania, then Russia, and came to the United States in 1905.

The first six years I received my schooling in the one-room school house in Vernon Center. Traveling by trolley car I attended 8<sup>th</sup> grade in Rockville. I graduated from Rockville High School in 1927 and got my first job in Hartford doing office work.

In 1932, during the great Depression, when my boss wanted to cut my salary in half, I packed my suitcase and took off for New York City. I had never been to New York, or anywhere other than home, but nothing stopped me in those days.

I omitted one salient fact above about my youth. My mother died of cancer when I was 13 and I was in "charge" while she was bedridden.

On the train to New York I purchased a New York newspaper and decided where I would look for a place to live. I decided I would live on the West Side, and found a room that night for \$7 a week. During my first year I had 21 jobs, but somehow I survived.

I married Louis Klothe in 1940, a teacher, but unfortunately he passed away in 1959. I had two sons to raise and a mortgage to pay. I took shorthand textbooks from the library and landed a secretarial job with the New York Public School System.

I retired in 1978. I always had a "little" garden, and even in summer I still had flowers and tomatoes growing.

In order to relate my recollections of life in Vernon Center, CT, I do have to begin with the arrival to this country of my father and mother, Benjamin and Esther Kanter and 2 year son (my brother) from Romania in 1904, because of the pogroms that were raging at this time. They went at once from Ellis Island to my maternal grandmother in Ellington.

In 1906 my father and his brother-in-law, his sister's husband bought the farm of approximately 100 acres, the place of my birth two years later in Vernon Center. On the land was an eight room house, long an abandoned property, with many missing or broken windows. There was also a barn, a building that was evidently used for storing things and what might have been a hen house. The house had no indoor plumbing, but there was a well only a few feet to the right of the house.

The two young men immediately arranged for two kitchens, each with a large woodburning stove. Coal was sometime later. Although I was very young, I do remember the large black metal sink and a pump.

The demarcation of the property, the full length of the road, was a stone fence, built by the Indians, we were told. As children we very frequently found stone arrow heads, evidence that Indians had lived in that area.

As soon as repairs were made, the two families moved in, thrilled to be having a home of their own and freedom, so precious and so appreciated.

At that point, my father, to earn a living, walked two miles to Rockville to work in a mill there. His earning was \$2 a day.

It wasn't long before repairs were made, and a barn and a hen house were ready. My father told me at the beginning there were a few chickens, a horse and buggy, and two cows. As a child I remember four horses, and fifteen cows, a dog and many cats.

Only about fifty percent of the land was arable at the time. There seemed to be hills everywhere and many rocks, some huge boulders. Much of the land had to be dynamited. Upon making inquiries, and learning that the usable land was suitable for tobacco growing, my father and brother-in-law became the first broad-leaf tobacco growers. The tobacco grown in Connecticut is not cigarette tobacco. It is the outside wrapper of the cigar.

We grew all our own fruit and vegetables and of course, hay for the horses and field corn of the cows. There were already there shade trees of all kinds, maple, oak, huge, elms, chestnut trees, wild cherry (choke) and white mulberry trees.

My house is no longer there, not even a remnant of a farm. My father was permitted, by arrangement with the government to live out his life there and when he died, it became a highway. I believe it is now Route 84.

**Spring-** There is no other way to describe spring. It is the awakening. The whole world seems to come out of a deep sleep.

Long before dawn I would hear the birds chirping. We had a variety, the robin, the bluebird, the Baltimore oriole, and always the unappreciated sparrow. It was nesting time, and we watched on our way to school the constant flying back and forth with strand of grass, leaves, string. It was planting time, fertilizer spreading time, seeding time.

It was also time for bees and mosquitoes. We did have portable screens, useful for air. There was always fly paper on tables and sticky streamers hanging from the ceiling. These were the days that we seeded the long narrow beds with tobacco seeds.

As we started for school the roads were deeply rutted, but it was good to see your neighbor again. Recently I received a 1969 map of Vernon and I was delighted to see listed names of people and places that I passed on my way. The Kneelands were on my right and just up the road on my left were Clarke's. Just a bit further I passed the Biddles' and the Welles. Mr. Welles used to light the street lamps that lined the main street opposite the school. Then the Parsonage would come into view and just past the school, the Congregational Church and nearby the County Home. The Ellis family was listed on the map and well they were represented in several homes as well as at school.

Our teacher would be out front ringing the bell and sometimes we could hear a phonograph playing a band to hurry us in. We were a full school, six grades, and when all came there were 22 pupils. We did learn from listening. Memorial Day was a day the teacher took us on a trip to the cemetery to place bouquets of hand picked flowers on the graves of Civil War veterans and now and then Revolutionary War heroes. This was a memorable history lesson.

After school we hurried home to do our chores. Mine was to make sure all the lamps had kerosene and clean wicks. My brothers would see to the cows and the milking.

Spring meant fishing as soon as we spotted worms. The boys cut their fishing poles from the trees and if hooks weren't available, a safety pin bent to the right shape might do.

And always the flowers, wherever there was a field that had not been plowed. Daisies, black-eyed Susan's, violets, buttercups, irises, wild roses, cowslips, and in damp places, the lady slipper.

It was a time of hope for the future.

**Summer** was the time for working in the fields and hoping the crops would produce. Summer brought forth the raspberries, small sweet strawberries, blackberry bushes and grapes everywhere. My mother was busy all summer long, canning, making jelly and storing everything in the cellar for the winter. Of course she only had a 3 burner stove, but it made do. One of the great delights was going with my father to the cider mill nearby, making cider and filling up those large barrels with a spigot. We made our own butter and pot cheese. Needless to say, we had thick rich cream and our own eggs with the breakfast meal.

There is much to explain about the raising of the tobacco. My father would ever be worrying about the tobacco crop. There always the possibility of a sudden storm which might also come with hail. This could ruin everything.

The hired help would be brought from Rockville, where there was an enclave of Polish immigrants. Both men and women were healthy and strong and excellent workers. They were brought to the farm by my father by horse and wagon, but it wasn't long before he purchased a Ford truck, a marvelous invention for him at that time. It had a handle out front. After putting the key in the ignition, one had to go out and crank up the handle to get the car started. Sometimes this could go on and on before it "caught."

During the growing season, suckers on the plants had to be removed. For this my father hired teenagers, young boys. The purpose was for the strength to enhance the quality of the tobacco.

When the plants were "ripe", they were chopped down at the base and left to wilt so that they would be less likely to get torn or pierced in some way. The plants would then be speared onto a lath. Then they were placed on wagons to be brought and hung in the sheds to dry and get "cured."

Some ten years after we had been raising broad leaf tobacco, my father switched to shade grown tobacco. Huge tents covered the fields. These cheese cloth tents were sewn by women standing on ladders.

When the sheds were full, holes were dug in the ground, about two or three yards apart, and filled with coal which was kept burning day and night for several days to avoid mildew. This was especially trying at night, because the man on duty had to stay awake the whole night.

The shade grown tobacco was strung onto laths by women who were paid "piece work." There was great competition among them. Once, I remember well, one woman left the shed and rushed toward our house. She lay down on the front lawn and gave birth to a big healthy boy. Within an hour the woman announced she was ready to go back to work. My mother rushed out to give her soup. My father, over her objections, took her home. She was back in three days.

Of course there was haying time and corn had to be harvested for the horses and cattle. It was great fun for us kids to run into the silo while the chopped corn was coming down. This dismayed our mother who had to comb out our hair.

There was an exciting event when I was about 10 or 11. My father had the electric company draw a line to the farm. We were the first in Vernon Center to have electricity. There was much talk about the cost which was about \$5,500. Once our line was in, neighbors were able to draw on that line. It was a miracle- the fun we had just pressing buttons and illuminating a room. Shortly after that we had indoor plumbing. Wonder of wonders.

When the summer came to a close and the tobacco was cured, there was the worry of selling the crop to the cigar companies, such as General Cigar Co. Sometimes this didn't occur until late winter or early spring. If the crop couldn't be sold, the loan from the Federal Loan Bank couldn't be paid. While the children were still not taken into confidence, we were well aware of the anxiety.

Many years later my father would tell me how things had changed when [President] Roosevelt arranged for farmers to do less farming and paid them for it. It was a bad way to go from Republican to Democrat.

**Fall** is the time when the labors of summer come to a close. Everything is ready for harvesting, matured, and sometimes at its peak for beauty. And of course, it's the time to bring the apples to the cider mill, for the pears to be picked and for the potatoes to be dug out of the ground. The leaves of the trees are a beautiful gold and red.

It's the time when I would hear, early, very early, in the morning, my father and brothers, sawing and chopping wood, getting ready for the long winter months. These were stacked in piles outside the door to the kitchen.

One of the delights of Fall for us kids, was chestnut picking time. The prickly burrs would have to be removed and we'd build a fire in the old "burnt house" nearby to roast them. Pure joy! When the farm was bought, there was an abandoned house on the property. The framework was still evident and what may have been the cellar was there and available to us kids. My remembrance is that it was made of stone but it may well have been cement. But it made a great place for us to build fires and roast chestnuts.

There is one thing I remember vividly that had another ending. My brother, two years older than I, decided to make mud pies. We used old pie plates to fill them with mud and then got the brilliant idea to bake them. Where else, but in the back-house? Wasn't it just like the stovetop with nice round circles?

It was called the backhouse, because it was always some twenty five feet behind the house. Of course, it wasn't a house, just a building with the required number of seats. In our case, because my uncle and his family lived in the same household, we had a larger framed building with partitions, "separate quarters" for each family.

I was told and gladly ran to the container on the kitchen wall and got the long wooden matches to light the fire in the holes, not giving a thought to the consequences. Needless to say, it was just a few minutes before there was no more place "to go." It's so many years ago, but I still see my brother's very red little behind. My punishment was to watch my brother being spanked.

Fall was the start of school again. Teacher would have us bringing in the lovely leaves to copy and display. We also brought in acorns to string up. Our teacher taught us many things about the outdoors and the importance of food for health.

Hay and corn filled the barns in readiness for the animals for winter.

**Winter-** As I have indicated previously, life on a farm is finely defined by the season. The most difficult one was winter.

Once the snow fell and covered the ground, it remained until spring thaw. Each succeeding snowfall just added to the depth. Two and three feet drifts were common. The horse and sleigh replaced the buggy.

We were isolated from the rest of the world except for the telephone which was installed early on. It was not a private line- several families used the same line. Each one had a different number of rings. Ours was 2. Of course, it was not unusual to hear a click and know that someone was listening in. There was no dialing. We would pick up the phone and the sweetest voice would come on with "number please". The operator knew everyone and everyone's problems and good fortunes.

Most of all, the milking had to be attended to, twice a day. We did have a hired man named George who had a room in the cellar, but it was my brothers' job to get the milking done before going to school.

We had an icehouse attached to the rear of the barn. During the winter months, ice was cut from a pond and stored and stacked with sawdust. It was my secret hiding place in the summer when I wanted to be alone.

Our clothes were scrubbed on a rubbing board with good ole Feels Naphtha soap, and then hung on a line from the kitchen window. Many times the clothes were frozen stiff, but smelled so sweet.

We trudged off to school with artics over high button shoes for which we had, what else, a button hook...

I don't remember ever having the school close because of the weather. Teacher came by trolley. If she couldn't make it, a child took over the supervision-one that the teacher had arranged for in advance. We had a pot belly stove and the first boy to arrive had to start the fire.

Since plumbing had not yet come to Vernon, outhouses were used. During the winter we had to put on our outer clothes, and if it was dark, take a lantern to find the way.

Many days when we came in “frozen”, Mama would open the over door and seat us in front. Many times our feet, boots and all, went right into the oven.

President Eisenhower once said, after visiting the home of his birth, “I never knew we were poor.” This was not so in our home. As children, we were not taken into confidence, but we all knew that until the crop was sold and we could borrow money for next year’s crop, things were tense for my mother and father.

Our cellar was stocked with vegetables, and of course we had all kinds of fruit that had been canned. Mama baked bread once a week. One day mice got into the flour barrel. My father went off the Rockville and brought back store bought bread. We didn’t like it.

We were isolated but for the mailman and the doctor. Dr. Rockwell came with his wagon or sleigh. He could have passed for a Santa, without a beard. A wonderful jovial person with all different colored pills. Pink was for this, red for that and so on. One thing stands out in my mind. As soon as the doctor arrived, my mother knew to bring him a tumbler of water for the thermometer. I don’t ever remember seeing alcohol or hearing a request for it. The thermometer was wiggled in the glass, shaken a few times- “next?”

Our worst winter, health wise, was the year 1918 when influenza raged. I was the only one who was terribly sick and no doctor was available. Mama and father, and I too, prayed.

But winter had its beautiful moments. At school, we had a large Christmas tree. For at least two winters, I remember, the tree came from our woods. Teacher had us making chains from construction paper, stringing acorns and popcorn. Real candles from Germany were attached to the tree and lit. Each child brought a gift to be hung on the tree, and of course a present for the teacher. One year I got a special thank you from the teacher for a calendar-wonderful teacher. A grab bag decided what each child’s present was.

Although we had no contacts outside the school, we knew life was around. When we’d find feathers on the ground in the henhouse, we knew an animal had gone off with a chicken or two. Occasionally, a red fox was seen, or we’d smell a skunk.

Life was difficult, but very memorable.