

Life Lessons



What I Learned in the Eighteenth Century

by Susannah Eanes

Several years ago, I found myself traveling back in time to a place unfamiliar and yet strangely pleasant –the Carolina backcountry of the post-Revolutionary era. The few years before had been a rather tumultuous plunge from single motherhood and career-climbing professional into an unplanned marriage to a man I did not love, with two pregnancies in rapid succession. When my third pregnancy in as many years bloomed forth with no relief from the avowedly absurd nature of my circumstances, I found myself faced with an unusual decision: embrace a volunteer hobby in a wholehearted escape from reality, or go stark raving mad.

What I found in the past may shock some. Far from being a dangerous, backward place, the rural landscape of our foremothers offered food, shelter, even clothing of a most healthful and interesting kind. Learning to sew, spin, cook, travel, and speak with some authority on these subjects, I discovered the keys to a welcome enlightenment. Here was the path to a simpler, more honest life than that I had followed up to that point, and I found myself lost in a welcome refinement of sensibilities, sharing knowledge and debate with a host of fellow scholars on everything from common medical practices and childbirth to the proper relevance and wearing of work corsets, or “sensible stays.”

If my life had been out of balance, here was its undoing: the more I learned, the more habits I adopted, putting on the clothing, mannerisms, speech and opinions of a well-read, somewhat typical settler in the times before the transference of commonalities into the written word became commonplace. In my sensible stays and bonnet, I learned that layering clothing kept you warm on cool mornings, that wool skirts do not ignite at the hearth easily, and that breakfast tastes best with the tang of wood smoke from an open fire. I learned to dance a joyful reel and play the psalter, stitched linen shirts painstakingly by hand, and welcomed visitors to my world with a gentle smile and a soft “tsk-tsk” in sympathy toward those poor individuals ostensibly forced by reduced circumstances to wear pants cut shorter than the knee or to go without a proper jacket or neckcloth. The skirts I wore fanned briskly about my legs on hot days, and a broad-brimmed hat shielded my eyes and kept my head protected from the blazing July sun. At night I

would crawl with my babies into blankets on the bare earth, tucked inside a tent or a well-constructed shebang, which is a sort of shelter woven from branches and sticks.

And in the morning, it would start all over again, with something new to discover, such as shared delights in the kitchen garden, exclamations over the size of the patty-pan squash and the savory redolence of sweet herbs and salad greens. I learned to pluck and dress a chicken still warm from barnyard exertions, and to gather eggs from dark corners of the barn before the raccoons did. I counted sheep and fed the flock, moving them from orchard to pasture by daylight while my eldest daughter helped the shepherd and his wife to shear and comb the lush fleeces in time for the spinning classes later in the week.

Explorations in the kitchen proved delightful and fulsome, with such epicurean delights as bread emerging fresh from the brick-lined oven, collops of roast pork and venison, fricasseed chicken feet, baked squash with corn relish, ripe creasy greens dripping with juice, apple pandowdy, cracknel with quidony, and iced ginger cake. Churning butter and beating biscuits kept my arms and upper body in shape; in fact the physical requirements of nearly everything from drawing well water to animal husbandry ensured that not an extra pound stayed nigh to be shimmied up inside my corset.

I traveled a good bit between lifestyles, one week doing laundry in the dooryard in a huge black kettle, and the next hosting tea in the polite company of peers in the drawing room, surrounded by tasteful arrangements and assisted by a butler and serving wench. I found myself thus comfortable in the Federal period of the New Republic, generally stated to be between 1790 and 1840. There the style of dress is graceful and not cumbersome, women were not yet wholly subjected to the whims of Victorian enclosures – both physical and societal, and industrial recruitment had not entirely destroyed the family relationship or human contact with nature. Growing one's own food, care of loved ones, trade and discourse with one's neighbors, and looking out for those less fortunate comprised the social sphere of most women. Moving within that circle, I felt myself growing in ways unimaginable prior to the actual experience. I learned to feel accomplishment in the products of my own hands, and thereby more fully to appreciate the handiwork and pains of others, and to take joy in simple, elegant surroundings, whether under the spreading arms of an old oak or safe inside a shuttered log cabin while the rain whirled and drummed on the roof.

Now, over a decade later, though my personal circumstances have happily changed so that I no longer need the escape of time travel, I still long for that simpler era, when men, women, and children worked side-by-side for a living, and nature's rhythm marked their efforts. I know now that the knowledge and experiences I gained in those earlier days taught me self-reliance, and in them I explored a wisdom that eludes us in these busier, noisier times. I have become less automatically accepting of modern short cuts and expediciencies, and have learned to evaluate new ideas on their long-term costs weighed against their often short-term benefits. My life has begun to crave slower, softer methods; I search out old ways of doing. Years ago I turned off electronic media except for the rare film or documentary, and would far rather play chess with my son or make figgy pudding with my daughter than carry on a long-distance telephone conversation.

They say for every permanent step forward, sometimes one must take two steps back. What I discovered by living in the past is that sometimes progress is not measured in years or miles, but authentically: in a baby's touch, the smile of a friend, the crunch of hard snow under your feet, the sight of the sun breaking through clouds as you finish weeding at the end of a row of beets, and the sigh of a lonely but fervent wind in the trees beyond a field of ripening hay. Looking back beyond the glistening electric lamps into rooms lit only by sunlight or a candle's golden glow enables us to find a peaceful existence silhouetted in the outcome of each moment: a quiet soulfulness of purpose, building character through self-accomplishment, without overt control over neighbor or environment –just the sure whispering of knowledge against the dark, and kismet in lessons passed over, unlearned, yet lingering through the passage of time.