

Aunt Cass - She Did It Her Way

Abel Bancroft, Sr. and his wife, Sally Tarbell, moved into the new community of Edwards in 1812 and it is believed their oldest child, Edward Abel (known as Abel), born in October 1812, was the second child born in Edwards. Abel, Jr. grew up to marry, as his first wife, Caroline Arnold, a girl from the neighboring town of Fowler. They had a large family of two boys and seven girls. The ninth, and youngest, child was Cascendana Ella, born May 1, 1851 in the Pleasant Valley area of Edwards just six weeks before her mother died of TB.

In later years she would relate the story that her mother was able to nurse her the day she died.

Cass, as she was known, had many interesting traits, which were recalled by two family members in 1977. She was a well-organized lady who expected her life to run on schedule, as well as those who lives touched hers. Following are recollections of her unique characteristics written for the Bancroft genealogy.

The recollections of Hazel Bancroft Freeman of Aunt Cass are as follows: "I remember Aunt Cass the best of any of my grandfather's sisters. She was the youngest and perhaps the most stubborn. Her first husband, Henry Brown, died before I was born, but I remember her marriage to Thomas John Hooper, a crotchety, old widower who had once been a miner in Michigan. His two daughters were married. Aunt Cass' daughter, Carrie, was married, and Uncle John decided promptly that her two sons, Roy and Ray, were old enough to be on their own. Sadie, the older daughter, was a very tiny person with poor health, and a remarkably agreeable disposition. Uncle John considered her a welcome addition to the household.



Aunt Cass Hooper with her brother, Hiram E. Bancroft. It is believed that the picture was taken in front yard of the Bancroft homestead in the Pleasant Valley area of Edwards, NY.

Aunt Cass was short and wide. She lived on a strict schedule and ruled her domain with a rod of iron. Breakfast was at six, summer and winter; dinner promptly at noon, supper at five. She loved company, but everyone in the house conformed to her rules. If, on a cold, dark winter morning, a guest preferred to remain in bed for an extra hour before braving the frigid atmosphere of the upstairs bedroom, she descended the stairs to find breakfast definitely over, the dishes washed, and no provision for a snack before noon.

When I was in school at Edwards, I stayed there occasionally, when the weather was stormy, and I remember vividly the warmth of Aunt Cass' small kitchen-dining room in the early morning. A kerosene lamp partially dispelled the darkness and Aunt Cass' ample breakfast rewarded us for the heroic effort needed to dress in zero temperature. We always had pancakes with butter and maple syrup, "warmed over potatoes", toast, sausage or ham and eggs, sweet cucumber pickles, coffee and delicious homemade fried cakes. Aunt Cass was an excellent cook and proud that she "set a good table".

Her housework was always done at 9:30 (with Sadie's efficient help). (Ruth Adams, another niece, mentioned that she got up between four and five and did all the work before daylight, except the dusting, which she had to wait for daylight to see to do). Even on Mondays, the laundry was swinging in the wind before nine o'clock. She had scant patience with the women who didn't wash on Monday because of adverse weather conditions. From 9:30 until 11:00 Aunt Cass

and Sadie sat in the tidy sitting room, Aunt Cass knitting or sewing and Sadie doing "fancy work", crochet or embroidery or working on the "biscuit" slumber robe, which consumed hours of time.

Dinner was served promptly at noon and after the dishes were washed, there was a long, leisurely afternoon when callers were welcome and there was time for more needlework. At five supper was on the table and in the early evening Sadie went to the post office for the mail, then did necessary errands - to Jim Shea's for milk and, once a week, to Carrie Pratt's for yeast. Uncle John and Aunt Cass played cards for an hour or two. By nine o'clock the house was dark and quiet. Only extreme emergencies were allowed to interfere with the family's established routine of living.

I shall always remember a particular Thanksgiving when Aunt Cora invited Uncle Eb and Aunt Josephine, Aunt Weltha, and Aunt Cass, the only members of Grandpa's family who lived near enough, for dinner. Aunt Cass was afraid of horses and when Uncle Clint Goodnough drove to town for them in the morning Aunt Cass refused to go. A strong wind was blowing and she was sure that something would blow across the road, frighten the horses, and they would all be injured. Later Uncle Eb appeared with his slow, steady Old Fan, but Aunt Cass' mind was made up, so Aunt Weltha stayed with her. We were still at home that day and late in the forenoon, when Mother looked from the pantry window and called us to see. I can see them yet. Aunt Cass and Aunt Weltha were walking the last of the three miles. The wind was still strong and Aunt Weltha's tall, thin frame swayed, and her skirts twisted around her as she struggled on. Aunt Cass' solid bulk defied the elements. She planted one foot ahead of the other with determination and they arrived at Aunt Cora's in time for Thanksgiving dinner. She did decide to accept a ride home in spite of her fears.

She lived for many years after Uncle John's death. Ray married and lived in Gouverneur where he worked in the Tribune Press office until his death. Roy came home and worked at odd jobs. He, Sadie, and their mother lived their well-ordered lives together until a paralytic stroke put an end to Aunt Cass' executive ability. She was a kindhearted, dependable person, and solid as a rock. Like many others, I remember her with affection." (Ruth Adams, who lived neighbor to Aunt Cass, told that following the stroke, she lived a few weeks and her bed was brought down into the living room so it would be easier for Sadie to take of her.)

In 1977 Cascendana Bancroft Brown Hooper had just one living descendant, her granddaughter, Anna M. Brown, in Gouverneur. The first week of December she wrote her memories of Aunt Cass and entitled it "Grandma Hooper".

"My earliest memories of my grandmother recall the picture of a short, stocky lady with grayish-white hair parted in the middle and pulled back into a fine braid. This braid was wound into knot at the back of her head and held in place by gray tortoise-shell hairpins. This severe hairstyle concealed a slight wave and soft curl, which was visible when she took it down at bedtime. As time passed, the gray changed into a beautiful silvery white top above a face with fine, though wrinkled, skin.

Grandma Hooper was a decisive, well-organized individual who believed in following a schedule. There was a time for all things and certain activities should be done at certain times. Because of her tremendous routine, in my childish mind, she could be very strict, too demanding, and overly expectant in her concept of how little girls should behave. At home my playmates included several boys in my immediate neighborhood. Perhaps in self-defense, or perhaps from instinct, I had become somewhat of a tomboy. My grandmother never did agree with some of my ideas of fun; she wanted Ray's daughter to be a "little lady".

I do not remember at just what age I began to spend a week at Edwards during the summer, but I do remember the afternoons, after the noon repast, when Grandma and Aunt Sadie daily devoted an hour trying to teach me the ladylike arts of sewing, knitting, embroidery, etc. I did learn to embroider, but poor Grandma never succeeded in making a "lady" out of me, but I have wished many times that I was as proficient as she and Aunt Sadie in producing lovely needlecraft articles. I still have three quilts they made for Mother and Dad as gifts. Even in 1977 I use on my dining table a linen table scarf Aunt Sadie embroidered.

I have said earlier that she lived by a strict schedule; Grandma definitely was the ruler in her household. At her home one came to meals on time - or else! Yet she never disappointed her family or guests who were treated to delicious and plentiful meals. Right here I must interject a humorous observation. I am sure that some of the 1977 medical profession might frown on the amount of salt she used in her meats and gravies. Aunt Sadie used to remark that one of Grandma's own family often said she would salt her food once, then turn her back and throw in another handful. At each meal appeared an unusual sauce or sweet such as homemade currant jelly or gooseberry conserve, the fruits for which were grown on the hillside by chicken coops.

One unforgettable food from Grandma's kitchen was those long brown sweet pickles in the crock down cellar. Many times I have made a trip down cellar to pull these succulent pieces of cucumber to a pickle dish for the next meal. I can honestly say I've never tasted anything like them! Also down cellar was large swinging rack on which the pans of milk were placed until the cream should rise - in turn to be used at the table, or in doughnuts, cookies and cakes.

Every morning an hour was set aside for handwork. The afternoons were used also for needlecraft, or for going calling or receiving callers. I do not recall going too often with Grandma, but I do remember going to different homes with Aunt Sadie. Grandma sat in a large, high-backed rocking chair and in a dim way I picture her feet planted on a curved footstool covered with tan material with rust-colored designs. Aunt Sadie, being tiny, sat in a smaller rocking chair. Sometimes they played games with me and sometimes they worked while I did something else. Uncle Roy had whittled some tops and when I was small I would sit for hours trying to spin the top as well as he. Frankly, I never succeeded.

While working, Grandma always wore a large apron over her long skirt and shirtwaist. When she dressed for company, she discarded the apron, of course, and wore at her throat a large bloodstone brooch, which I thought gave her a distinguished look.

In the fall of 1928 Grandma was stricken with a paralytic stroke and the front parlor became her bedroom. Mrs. Leon Spicer was hired to care for her. I always remember the kindness and sympathy of Mrs. Spicer for Grandma. My father and I had gone to Edwards one Saturday by train. That afternoon I was in the room with them when Grandma asked her to sing Red Wing. The lady, who was quite large, possessed a rather pleasant voice. I have never forgotten standing by my grandmother's bed while she sang for her. I think this was the last time I saw her alive. Grandma died 19 Dec 1928, at age 77, and is buried in the old Edwards cemetery (Riverside) at the center of town.

These reminiscences are those of a young person as she recalls someone who wanted her to be a "lady". I hope my grandmother would be pleased to know that her tomboy did become a reasonable facsimile of her image. And I must add a postscript, which should honor her. She was, indeed, - a lady."

Contributed by LaVerne H. Freeman who gathered and organized the Bancroft material into the Bancroft genealogy in 1977.

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