RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tillotson DB37-4C

Mary F

June 18, 2002

FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE LIBRARIAN OF THE PROCTOR, VT. LIBRARY

My name is Sylvia Olson Tillotson. I was born in Proctor ninety three years ago and lived a very happy six years of my life in that town. Last year I wrote a little book for my grandchildren and great grandchildren telling them what it was like being a little girl in a little town nearly a hundred years ago.

Now I am seeking a writer interested in writing a more scholarly book which I have tentatively titled "Proctor, the Making of an American Town". Let me hasten to say that I seek neither acknowledgement or renumeration for any help I can give to such a project. All I would want would be a copy of the book (in case I am still alive!)

Last year I wrote an outline of what I wanted the book to cover. It should be a referral book for civics and social studies classes. I realize that I have neither the strength nor the ability to write a book which would require so much research and visiting in this village.

Proctor is a very unique company town. In the 20 years between 1880 and 1900, Irish, Swedes, Hungarians, Italians, Russians, French Canadians and Yankees settled there. I never heard of any friction between the nationalities. It is completely unlike other company towns such as the coal mining towns of West Virginia and Kentucky, the steel towns of Western Pennsylvania and Indiana, nor the factory and mill towns of New England.

The subject deserves a far better writer than I am! If you can find such a writer I will be glad to send him or her a copy of my own little book and a copy of the outline of the book I would like to see written.

Sincerely,

Sylvia Tillotson

Sylvia Tillotson

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ans- 10/3/02

MEMORIES
of a
GREAT GRANDMOTHER

by

Sylvia Tillotson

It is difficult to write your first book when you are 92. It interferes with my day time naps which I find increasingly attractive. I was born in 1908 and first thought the title should be "Growing up with the 20th Century". But this would not be true. A century is a hundred years and this book is mainly about my first six years. As you now realize, it will not be a big book.

My original title would be misleading because to write about my first six years I find it necessary to go back to 1882 to explain why these first six years have been so important in living the rest of my life.

I am the child of Swedish immigrants. My maternal grandparents came to America in 1882. My mother was three years old and has no memory of Sweden. If she had, this book would have been longer.

Why did they come to America and why did they go directly to Proctor, Vermont, a small town nestling in the green mountains? There were four children at the time, from a baby to a seven year old. It could not have been an easy trip. At this point I would like to ask my English grandchildren to imagine taking four children of those ages to Disney World. It is mind boggling. And the trip to Disney World would be a matter of hours. To go from Sweden to Boston in 1882 would be a matter of weeks.

Again I wonder, why did they come? I simply never thought to ask. I have heard many reasons why people migrated. Some people came to avoid religious persecution. But my grandparents were staunch Lutherans in a country overwhelmingly Lutheran. Some people came to avoid military conscription. But Sweden is a small, peaceful country and I doubt there was need of a large standing army. Jewish people in eastern Europe came to escape the cruel pogroms waged against Jews in those countries. Irish came because of the great potato famine. English came, I think, because they considered America to be a home away from home.

The reason I find most applicable to my grandparents was perhaps the main reason for most European immigrants

at that time. After the Civil War the North experienced an explosive growth. Manpower was needed to lay railroad tracks, to erect skyscrapers, industrial plants, homes and schools for an ever growing population, and to lure as many as possible to settle the vast empty land between the populous east and west coasts.

To accomplish this, agents were sent all over Europe to spread the word that America was the land of the future. That men with courage, perseverance and the willingness to work hard could provide their families a far brighter future than ever before thought possible. And so they came, by the thousands.

Among the agents abroad were representatives of the Vermont Marble Company. This explains why my grandparents came directly to Proctor after they landed in Boston.

How did they feel as they looked at this strange land? First of all there must have been a feeling of great relief to be off the bounding main. Then pleasure to realize that Proctor was a little place surrounded by forests, lakes and mountains. Just like home.

Then came the down side. Every one seemed to be speaking a language they couldn't understand. Next came the realization these people wore different styled clothing and their hair was cut or combed differently from the Swedish style. Women, particularily, notice these things. This was long before radio, television and rapid transit. There was a definite difference between the customs and dress as well as language of nations.

Next came depression. Suddenly they were aware of the thousands of miles that separated them from home. They had started out with such high hopes that with hard work they could give their children a far better future than if they had remained home. Now they felt that there would always be a gap between those who were born in this country and spoke English so fluently and the newcomers. For the first time they felt slightly inferior - something which they had never felt at home.

You can imagine what a relief it was to discover that several Swedish families were already living there. In fact there were enough to build a Lutheran church. Every one wanted to become an American, but how much more fun it was to pursue that rocky road with others like yourself. It is easier to laugh at yourself when others are making the same mistakes.

Now that I have one set of grandparents settled I must return to Sweden for my other set.

My paternal grandparents didn't arrive until 1895. This grandfather owned a large farm in southern Sweden. It had been in his family for generations. The main crop was pine seedlings which were shipped all over the world. I don't know what happened, but my grandfather lost his farm. By this time it was quite customary to look to America for new beginnings.

My father and his twin sister, Hannah, were just 17 years old. My father was in a private school and it was decided that he should remain behind for the few months before he would graduate. My grandparents and the three daughters set sail for America.

When my father did arrive it was decided that he should enroll in a small Swedish college in New Jersey, I think it was called "Uppsala" and I believe it is still in existence. I can only assume that he learned of the place from his instructors in Sweden. During the year his teachers encouraged him to become a minister. So at the close of his freshman year he and a friend decided to hitch hike to Missouri where the Lutheran church headquarters were located.

The boys got as far as Buffalo, New York. My father was homesick and decided he didn't want to be a minister anyways. He returned to his new home in Proctor.

The Olsons and Ericksons must have had quite different reactions when they first came to America. My mother's parents, the Ericksons, still in their 20s, held high hopes for a happy and prosperous future.

My father's parents, then in their 40s, left behind a comfortable standard of living and the respect given to families who had been prominent members of their community for generations. In America, they became just another immigrant family.

It was from Hannah that I learned what life was like in a Sweden that seems almost feudal now. A large number of farm workers as well as indoor servants were need to maintain a mostly self sustaining home. Milk maids had to change into fresh, white clothing before they entered the barn to milk the cows. They may never have heard about Pasteur, but they knew the necessity of absolute cleanliness when handling milk.

There were shoemakers who arrived once a year to make shoes for owner and workers alike. Dressmakers also arrived to make clothes for the female members of the household.

In a country where long nights and short days occupy a large part of the year, the celebration of Midsummer's Night, the longest day of the year, is as festive as is Christmas, nearly the shortest day of the year. When you lived on a farm, guests might stay for several days as their arrival could only be by horse and buggy.

How difficult it must have been to go from being the owner of such an estate to being a member of the work force of another man. I never heard a single word of self pity from any member of the family. Hannah, who had once had nannies to care for her, now became a governess in the Proctor family. She thoroughly enjoyed telling us tales of the "poor little rich girl" she cared for.

My father, of course, worked for the Vermont Marble Compsny. He had artistic talent and carved the scrolls, figures and vital statistics of the diseased into the ornate monuments so in demand at this time. What my grandfather did I don't know. I can't believe that his experience as a farmer was of much use to a marble quarrying industry.

We are getting close to the time my book was supposed start. Proctor was named for the man who owned it, Redfield Proctor. He probably owned all the marble quarries in central Vermont. He was also a senator. I do not think it is a coincidence that so many of the government buildings in Washington are made of marble.

When it came time to provide housing for his workers, the senator was well ahead of his time. Proctor in no way resembled the mining towns where people lived in shacks that were often unpainted.

Rather, houses were built in clusters as needed where there was no plan to establish a quarry. As a result, the Proctor I remember was a quaint mixture of forest, houses, meadows and quarries. Perhaps strangest of all, these houses were not cut out of the same mold. Our house did not look at all alike to those of our neighbors or relatives.

Since there seemed to be no comprehensive building of the town, each section as built was given a name to give people some sense of location. My home was on Gibb's Hill, named for a man who once farmed there but now kept only a small herd of cows, sufficient to supply the neighborhood with milk.

My cousins, Evelyn and Norman, and their parentslived in a section called the Garden of Eden. For a long time I believed this was the original Garden of Eden talked about in Sunday School.

My mother's parents lived in the Beaver Pond section. Their home fronted a pond and a hill, or small mountain rose in the back. There was enough surrounding land for my grandfather to keep two pigs and a cow. There was also a vegetable garden, current and gooseberry bushes and a chicken coop. The boys in the family caught fish in the pond and every one in the family at times picked berries on the mountain side. Eventually there were nine children, but keeping supplied with food was never a problem!

Now is the time for the sentence with which I planned this book. "My parents were married in September, 1904". Originally they had planned a May wedding. When they learned

a new home would be available in the fall, they decided that having a new house would be worth the wait.

This book still doesn't have a title. Perhaps "Life without Electricity" would be apt. If you are able to find others as old as I am and can persuade them to read this book, the chances are they will say, "That 's not the way I remember it!"

If you lived in a city in 1908 you would have had gas or electricity to light your home. Chances are that the main roads in town would be paved and more people would have cars.

I am describing a small town in Vermont. Not too long ago it was commonplace to say that more cows lived in Vermont than people. Also that it was the last state in the Union to pave its roads. These were meant as put down remarks. I regard them as proving the superior wisdom of Vermonters.

Cows cause much fewer problems than people. They do not commit crimes orovercrowd the world by excessive breeding. Their children aren't juvenile delinquents nor are they a great expense to raise. I would say that a ratio of sixty cows to every 40 humans would be reasonable.

As to paved roads, have they made this world a better place to live in? More paved roads mean more cars. More cars mean more accidents and pollution.

My advice to underdeveloped nations: Don't pave your roads and keep them two laners.

But I do digress. In 1904 my parents were proud to move into a six room, one bath house painted white with green shutters. Forty four years later I returned and found it was still a sparkling white house with green shutters. This house is 97 years old. My compliments to the carpenter who built it and to the many families who have lived in it over the years.

Of course there were drawbacks which most people would find unacceptable today. Since electricity had not come to Proctor, homes were lit by lamps. There were no furnaces so heating was done by stoves. We did have indoor plumbing and never had to rely on wells or outhouses as did many

people in other small towns.

The house had a shed which was an all purpose area where shovels, rakes, lawn mowers, sleds and storm windows were housed.

A barn with an attacked chicken coop was in back and a vegetable garden was soon planted. Since space seemed to be no problem we always had a nice lawn for the front and sides of the houseand there was plenty of space between the homes.

The first four years brought three children. My brother, Bert, was born in 1905, my sister, Alfhild, in 1907 and I in 1908. Babies were born at home then. There were no phones and my father had to go for the doctor when needed. The Company sent a nurse to be with my mother for three days after each birth after which my mother felt capable of taking over.

Dr. Hack may have been the only doctor in town.He always came to our house if anyone were sick. I don't know if he even kept office hours. No one had "check ups" in those days. We saw the doctor only if we were really sick.

I look back and see this life through the eyes of a small child. No doubt my mother would see it differently.

A coal stove bears little resemblance to an electric one and nothing at all to the microwave. First a fire had to be started with a mixture of paper and kindling wood. Gradually coal was added until a good fire was underway. And this was not the end. The stove was needed to heat at least half the house. Coal was needed to be added from time to time to keep that heat at a proper degree. The coal didn't appear by magic. It was in a coal hod which had been filled at the coal bin in the cellar and lugged up the stairs.

The modern electric stove has a dial to regulate the heat of the oven. Mother used her elbow which she put in the oven to judge whether it was the right heat for a cake or roast or anything else she was preparing at the time.

There was another, fancier type stove in the parlor. My sister and I have a dispute over a third, Ben Franklin type, stove in the dining room. She says there wasn't any but I maintain that since the upstairs rooms were only heated by the pipes from these stoves, the family couldn't have endured the long cold winters without them.

During the occasional hot spells in the summer, fires were kept low in the kitchen stove, only to keep thewater in the water tank hot. Meals were prepared on the kerosene stove in the shed. This gave out very little heat. Many people referred to the shed as their summer kitchen.

Just as clothes were washed on Mondays and ironed on Tuesdays, Mother always baked bread and rolls on Friday. Pies, cakes, doughnuts and cookies were baked throughout the week as needed.

Oatmeal was started at night and gently cooked at the back of the stove until morning. Like all New Englanders we had baked beans every Saturday night. The beans were soaked in water overnight and baked all day with a piece of fat salt port and brown sugar added for flavoring. I don't remember any packaged foods besides Jello and corn flakes.

Oranges were a luxury. This was before the days of inter state highways and big trucks. It took a long time to bring tropical fruits to New England.

Most staples were bought in large quantities. Flour and sugar in large bags, apples by the barrel and potatoes in large gunny sacks. It was the job of the children to wrap each apple in a piece of newspaper to prevent a rotten apple from infecting its neighbors. Both apples and potatoes were stored in the cellar.

Other things stored in the cellar were root vegetables and canned goods. Nearly everyone canned. Even if they didn't have a garden, they would buy the vegetables and fruit at the height of the growing season when prices were very low and can them. Pickles, jams and jellies and chili sauce were also made and canned.

A box of matches was a needed staple in every home. Matches were needed to light the fire in stoves, to light lamps at night and to light candles on birthday cakes and Christmas trees. It is amazing there were'nt more fires. I don't think we had a fire station. Surely I would remember the bright red wagon drawn by huge horses if we had such an apparatus in town.

A bonfire was started in the back yard from time to time to get rid of the leaves in the fall and to just clean up any boxes or newspapers that had collected.

Which brings me to the matter of trash, the big problem in today's throw away world. Left over food was eaten by the dog, or in our case, chickens. Dogs did not have their own dog food then. They ate what the family ate.

There was generally a large pile of ashes at the end of winter. Some of it was used as fertilizer for the lawn. The rest was carted off to the town dump. I don't know where it was located or how people brought their stuff to it.

I wonder if "Blue Monday" originated at this time when it was the generally accepted day for washing clothes. Without electricity it was strictly a manual job. Mother would put the tub on two facing chairs. A hose ran from the hot water tap in the sink to the tub. There was no powdered soap then and bar soap was shaved and put in the tub as the water ran.

The clothes were scrubbed on a board made for that purpose. After several rinses the clothes were put through a wringer. Many things needed starch such as the collars and cuffs of men's shirts and the petticoats, dresses and aprons of mother and her two girls. Mother made her own starch.

Finally the clothes were put in a big basket and brought out into the back yard where a clothes line was strung up and the clothes attached to the lines with clothespins. Even on sunny days it took a long time for the clothes to dry. Late in the afternoon the clothes were brought in. This was long before nylon and orlon were woven into fabrics and nearly everything had to be ironed, even the bed linens. These articles were all sprinkled and rolled into tight small bundles.

If Monday was Blue Monday, Tuesday must have been the pits. Without electricity, irons were heated on the top of the stove. A detachable handle was used to lift the iron from the stove. Several irons were needed as the heat quickly evaporated and the iron in use had to be replaced by a hotter one.

Cleaning day was in the middle of the week. Without electricity, the carpets were cleaned by carpet sweepers or brooms. Spring and fall housecleanings were a must. Then windows were washed and shelves and closets cleaned. Rugs were taken out and hung on clothes lines. A specially made rug beater was used to beat the dust out of them. This was generally my father's job. He also helped with the curtains which, after being washed, were stretched out on a curtain frame. This insured that the curtains would retain their shape and need no ironing.

How did women survive? There was even time for embroidery, knitting and sewing. Mother made all our dresses, sweaters and mittens.

In trying to figure out how this was done, one must realize how many things women didn't have to do. Without cars, women weren't chauffeurs, running errands for the entire family.

Women were proud of their housekeeping skills. They didn't need to "prove themselves" by having careers or doing all sorts of volunteer work. Frugality was admired. Most women kept balls of string. Scotch tape hadn't been invented and everything came wrapt in paper and string. The string was saved and formed into a ball with newly acquired string fastened to the last end. Socks and stockings were darned several times before being discarded.

I do not remember mother ever going marketing. My father passed a meat market going to and from work and he bought the meat on his way home. A small Mom and Pop grocery store was not very far away. The oldest daughter, driving a horse and buggy, would arrive mornings and take orders. In the afternoon she would return with the groc-

eries.

Mr. Gibbs, whom I mentioned earlier, arrived every morning with the milk and the news of the day. As he poured the milk from his large container into our pitchers, he and my mother would discuss their fear of the coming of World War I. Mr. Gibbs had relatives in England where the war had already started. I remember feeling proud that my mother seemed as well informed of current events as was Mr. Gibbs.

The ice man and bakery wagon also came daily; at least from late spring through early autumn. Ice was needed only in summer as the cellar was a pretty good refrigerator for the rest of the year. The bakery wagon was tempting with its odors of freshly baked pies, cakes, cookies and rolls. Mother seldom bought, however. She felt it was a sign of a lazy housekeeper not to do her own baking. Not until bread came sliced did she finally buy "store bread".

All these vehicles were horse driven. A car was rarely seen on our street and a truck was non existant. No one had to fear that children might run into the road and be hit by a car.

Up until now I have been describing only what happened at home. My father worked a six day week. At noon time a whistle blew and all workers, whether in offices, stores or industry, would stop work and walk home. No one rode any vehicle to work. Dinner was always at the middle of the day. Families ate all three meals of the day together. No one had conflicting schedules that interrupted this gathering of the entire family.

My father wasn't exactly idle on Sunday. Church and Sunday School were a must. Lawns had to be mowed in the summer and leaves raked in the fall. In the spring storm windows were taken down, windows washed and screens put up. In the fall this process was reversed. Winding clocks and locking doors seemed to be the father's job.

From time to time he had to decapitate a chicken for a Sunday chicken dinner. This involved singeing the feathers from the bird and removing its entrails. In summer he was also in charge of making the ice cream. I am not an expert on the making of ice cream but I know it meant turning a

crank endlessly.

It is true that Proctor was a Company town but there were many sattelite businesses that sprung up. There was one big (in my eyes) general store that was owned by the company. But there were also a meat market, a creamery, a combined drug store and ice cream parlor, the milk man, coal men, mom and pop grocery stores, to name the ones that come to mind. Movies were shown in the Townhall. We children went to matinees only occasionally. I can remember seeing only Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin.

Although the main occupation for women was being a housewife, there were single women and widows who had to earn a living. Nursing, teaching and some office work were the only positions available and acceptable for women. Women lacking this training or needing to be home with their children opened their own business from their homes. Thus millinery shop, dressmaking services and bakeries often operated out of the home.

In the millinery shop the owner would buy the basic hat forms. The buyer would select ribbons and artificial fruit and flowers from the stock the owner provided. The hat would then be decorated according to the buyer's wishes. Hats were then very important. Women wouldn't dream of going anywhere without wearing a hat and even little girls wore them to school.

Although women made their own house dresses, "good" dresses were very intricate with tucks, pleats and inserts of lace. It took a long time to make one of these dresses.

I don't mean to give the impression that we were back in the Stone Age as far as transportation was concerned. Our neighbor, Mr. Sodeberg, who lived across the street owned a car. He was the chief of police. I believe he had one assistant. Proctor was not a high crime area. As he and his wife had no children they would very kindly invite neighbors to join them for their Sunday afternoon drive. It was my turn once and I was thrilled.

Cars were generally jacked up when cold weather came. Like sports roadsters now, all cars were open to the elements

Townships did not have snowplows and I doubt the cars were powerful enough to battle the snow drifts. Very few women drove. A crank was needed to start the car and if it wasn't used correctly the result could be a badly bruised arm or shoulder.

There was a livery stable in town and it was possible for a young man to rent a horse and buggy for an afternoon and take his sweetheart for a ride.

The most used transportation was the train. Proctor was only six miles from Rutland, a much larger place. People went there frequently to do their shopping. We had another set of relatives living there. The big entertainment there was being taken on a trolley ride around the city.

Entertaining the children takes up a great deal of time for modern parents. Mine would have been amazed. Playing was what came naturally and children were expected to do it on their own. This does not mean that Mother could sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee while reading the newspaper. Then as now a quiet game of Ring Around the Rosie could quickly change into a contest threatening loss of life or limb. Mother was always located near a window where she could supervise our activities.

We received gifts at Christmas time and for our birthdays but we preferred to make up our own games. This required only imagination and needed no special equipment. An adult watching us would have thought many of our games pretty silly but we thought them hilarious and played them over and over again. I can never remember feeling bored or complaining to mother that there was nothing to do.

Our parents did spend a lot of time with us, both quality and quantity. This may be due partly to the fact that they never went out socially unless the children were expected too. Baby sitters hadn't been invented then.

Quality time with Mother was late im the afternoon when she was preparing supper. We children would gather in the kitchen for a concert. Mother had a lovely voice and she loved to sing. Her repertoire ranged from Civil War songs to the songs of Stephen Foster and the folk songs of Ire-

and Scotland. She also gave dramatic recitals such as "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight", "Message to Garcia" and "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere".

Quality time with my father meant doing a brisk set of Swedish military exercises, listening to stories such as a cleansed version of Swift's Gulliver's Travels or on a summer evening laying on the grass and learning both myth and fact about the constellation of the stars.

In the spring the entire family would go for a walk in the woods and bring back a wide assortment of wild flowers such as trailing arbutus, mayflowers, trillium, Dutchman's britches and lady slipper.

In the summer we would go on the mountain side and pick strawberries, raspberries, black berries and blueberries as the season advanced. My father would strip peeling bark from the from birch trees and make little baskets for each child. Our contribution was to fill our basket and empty it into the big pail. We were then free to play and explore the meadow we were in. When we came home mother would bake a pie or shortcake with the fruit and the rest would be canned the following day.

In the fall we would gather the fallen nuts from chestnut and butternut trees. The butternuts were so hard it would take a hammer to open them - but what good butternut cakes mother could make!

In the winter when it was too cold to play outside and my father was longing to read his newspaper in peace, he would place Alfhild and I in a big arm chair and anchor us firmly by placing on our laps a large, illustrated copy of Milton's "Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained". Realising that this was a special privilege, we would sit quietly while turning the pages and looking with fascination at the good and fallen angels.

Money occupied no space in our thoughts. Each Christmas we would find a shiny copper penny in the toe of our stocking. Whatever became of it I don't know. Today a penny can't buy anything. Then we could buy a candy, pencil, erasor or a penny post card.

From time to time in the summer time, Mother would give us

each a penny and hand in hand we would trudge off to the Mom and Pop store to make our selection from the large array of candy available.

Without television to keep us posted on the latest toys available in the market place, we never asked for or expected a constant supply of new toys. No one ever asked us what we wanted for Christmas. The thought that Santa Claus, a perfect stranger, wanted to bring me presents was so wonderful that I never dreamed of being so greedy or pushy as to tell him what to bring. As a result, I have no remembrance of ever being disappointed in what my stocking held.

Now two new beginnings were looming ahead of me. The first was school. Proctor didn't have a kindergarten. Children entering first grade could do so if their 6th birthday came by the first of the following year. I squeaked in with a November 25th birthday.

My sister, although only 13 months older than me, always acted the surrogate mother when we were away from home. On the first day of school she brought me into my class room and advised me that the best seats were in the front of the room. Although she didn't exactly say so, I gathered that the name of the game was to beat all the other kids when it came to grades.

At the same time another new beginning was forming. My father decided there was no future in a company dominated by one family. After several exploratory trips he bought a monument business in Norwich, New York, a town about twice the size of Proctor. In a few months we moved. This was my first really big new beginning - new house, new neighbors, new school and new friends to make.

As I look back through the years, I often wonder, what if? What if my grandparents did not have the courage to cross the ocean to live in a country where they did not know the language? My father and mother would never have met and there would never have been a "me". What if my father did not have the courage to leave a secure position in Proctor and strike out on his own, despite the fact that he had three small children and a frail wife to take care of? The chances are that I may

never have gone to college. What if I hadn't the courage to turn down a good position with a publishing house in Syracuse to venture into New York city to try for more exciting and glamorous work? I would never have met Dick who became father to our three children, Janice, Sheila and Richard.

The what ifs will go on through the generations. Now that I am old, I am beginning to receive the rewards in a kaleidoscope of memories, both happy and sad. The greatest reward is that I will never feel alone.

I have reached the age of six, and as promised, this book is finished. I have finally found the proper title - "New Beginnings - Part I".