

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Early Settler Daily Life

Most settlers arriving in Upper Canada had to first clear their land in order to build their homes and farms. A family's survival required undertaking a wide range of daily tasks in order to meet their farm and household needs. In order for a family to succeed, it was necessary for each member of the family to contribute.

In the early days of settlement, it was not uncommon for women and children to help with the heavy tasks of clearing land, planting and harvesting crops. At the same time, a woman was expected to maintain the household providing food and clothing for her family. The farmer and the older boys of the family would concentrate their energy on clearing land, planting and sowing, building needed farm buildings, and tending to livestock. The more help provided by children, the more productive the family. Sharing of household and farm chores also provided children with a chance to acquire the skills and knowledge which they would need as adults. Girls would help with the cooking, sewing, cleaning and looking after the younger children. Boys would be expected to help out with the animals and planting and harvesting crops. The chores and responsibilities often got in the way of children attending school because there was so much work to do at home. Play and games usually came after all the chores were finished. Pioneer children had simple toys and games made out of any available materials such as pebbles, sticks, and scraps of wood or fabric. Toys were often homemade and geared toward learning.

By the mid-1800s, markets for surplus food and farm surplus were beginning to develop. Areas with a larger population, more prosperous farms, and better access to improved transportation tended to develop more rapidly. At first, surplus products were bartered or sold to supply goods and services that the family could not provide for themselves. For example, butter may have been traded for sugar, or a portion the wheat taken to the grist mill to be ground into flour was left as payment. With the increased availability of goods and services the settler family was freed from less productive, time consuming tasks, allowing more time for production of items to sell or exchange, and creating opportunities for leisure activities.

The family laundry was an all-day process which involved the mother and the children. Children didn't get to wear a clean outfit every day. It would have been far too hard to keep up with that much laundry. Bathing was also interesting. It was such a long process to heat the water that once a week was as often as they could manage. When they did bathe, they started with the oldest down to the youngest not changing the water in between. If you were the youngest child you had the coldest and dirtiest bath.

Children went to school together in a one room school house. One teacher would be in charge of teaching many different age groups. The focus in school was the 3R's - Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. Most of the writing was done on slates with slate pencils. School books and writing paper were scarce so students did much of their learning by rote which meant memorizing long poems and stories. Students also had to memorize math rules and would often have spelling bees to demonstrate their knowledge.