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I REMEMBER ---

An Interview with Ida M. Tarbell by Frederick Tisdale

When I entered Allegheny College at Meadville, Pa., in 1876 I was the only girl in the freshman class. There were four other girls in the school.

A furious controversy raged over the co-educational movement. Boy students at Allegheny would have nothing to do with the girls. Our presence was considered an invasion of a field belonging exclusively to men. Women's brains were ~~considered~~ ^{thought to be} inferior to men's. It was feared that we co-eds would lower the standards of teaching. Men felt that the courses would have to be made easier to accommodate the feminine capacity.

The boy students played football and baseball. We girls had no games. They did ~~give us~~ ^{use} the Del Sarte system of calisthenics. Dressed in high-necked waists and bloomers that reached below the knees, we followed the exercises by count. Indian clubs and dumbbells made up our athletic equipment.

We studied by kerosene lamps. Each room was heated separately by a soft coal stove. Students had to feed these hungry little monsters—a very dirty business.

In those days girls were not afraid to dress warmly. The foundation of my winter costume was a woolen union suit. It had long sleeves and the legs reached to the ankles. I also wore ~~well~~ ^{wool} stockings and flannel

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petticoats. Every girl had two of these underskirts--a white one and a red one. They were elaborately scalloped and embroidered by hand.

Instead of coats we wore shawls. The designs were colorful and beautiful. I can remember older men who wore shawls with their high silk hats. Lincoln did. For indoor wear women had slippers with blunt, comfortable toes and low heels. Outdoors we wore laced high shoes or congress gaiters. Elastic panels in each side allowed the gaiters to be pulled on easily and held the shoe-tops snugly against the ankles.

I remember when hoop-skirts were the fashion. They consisted of wire frames several feet in diameter at the bottom. In those days "nice girls" could show their insteps but not their ankles. Hoop-skirts presented grave problems in navigation. The unpaved streets were usually dusty or muddy. Sidewalks were almost as bad. A lady could hold her skirt just so high to keep it from being soiled.

These garments became unmanageable in crowds and windy days were one crisis after another. A strong gust would put the hoopskirt ^{out of} beyond control. Men gathered at blustery corners where they were ^{thrown} ~~trown~~ into a state of great agitation by glimpses of petticoats and ankles. To escape such mortifications women developed great manipulative skill. The skirts were pressed in at the sides or tilted to get them through doors or into carriages. Outer surfaces only could be displayed to the eye of the male.

Fantastic as this fashion was, it took several transformations and years of ridicule to kill it. The second stage was the half-hoop which held out the back of the skirt only. I remember wearing these. Ultimately the hoop shrank until it became a bustle and finally little more than a bow.

These grotesque modes marked the struggle for that ideal of beauty, the small waist. To attain it inconvenience and even torture was endured. Corsets were laced to suffocation. Having achieved the smallest waist possible the lady proceeded to accentuate it. The effect was emphasized by

a vast yardage of skirts below and bust pads above. Generally the pads were stuffed with hair and covered with lace. But many women wore pneumatic bust pads which could be inflated to the desired size.

A product of this era was the walking posture known as the "Gre-cian Bend". Exponents minced down the street with their padded bustles thrust out behind, their padded busts thrust out in front, their heads held as far back as nature would allow. The fashion finally was laughed out of existence and equilibrium restored.

Dress reforms came slowly. The "rainy ^{day} daisy" skirt roused intense antagonisms. This revolutionary garment not only cleared the muddy ground but exposed the shoe tops. It was such a sensible idea for wet days that it prevailed against accusations of immodesty. One had to be most circumspect in wearing it. A girl could get herself talked about ^{if} she appeared in a "rainy ^{day} daisy" ~~one~~ ^{during} sunny weather.

When I was a girl women didn't buy dresses at stores. Ready-made clothes were poorly designed, sketchily made, ill fitting. Twice a year, spring and fall, a sewing woman came to the house. She made all the clothes the women of the family wore. Her visit was preceded by elaborate preparations including the buying of piece goods, thread, etc. A room was set aside where the seamstress lived and worked. She ate with the family. Designs for costumes were taken from fashion magazines or patterns.

Try to imagine a world without automobiles. Long distance travel was by train but all other traffic was horse drawn. None of the students at Allegheny⁶ owned horses. They hired them from the livery stables. Once a year I drove from the college to my home in Titusville. The distance was thirty miles and the trip took an entire day. My favorite team was a pair of white trotters. There was a thrill about handling such high-steppers which few of the present generation will ever enjoy.

Roads in the country, streets in the towns were unpaved. Farmers paid their road taxes by working a certain number of days on the highways.

They plowed the sides of the roads and piled the loose earth in the center making a high, uncertain ridge. This method still is used in some country districts. How ~~this~~^{it} is supposed to improve the highways I have never been able to figure out.

Titusville is near the site of the first oil well. The oil boom made many rich families. In those days wealth meant fine, fast horses. At 4 o'clock on certain afternoons Main Street in front of our home became a speedway. It was cleared to allow harness racing. The town's best horses flashed by in clouds of dust, their drivers shouting, the onlookers cheering.

A favorite evening pastime was driving out into the country for 50¢ chicken dinners. On winter nights groups of young people went on bob-sled rides. They crowded into the broad beds of these vehicles which had been covered deeply with straw. Buffalo robes kept them warm. Strings of sleigh bells jingled. Before long each boy had his arm about his girl's waist. But there was no "necking"--we used to call it "spooning". It was a dangerous feat for a boy to kiss a girl good-night at her door.

I remember only two girls who smoked during my years at Allegh^Eany College. We never saw them at it but we knew they did. They boarded downtown and smoked secretly in their rooms. The idea that a nice girl could smoke in public or carry a cigarette on the street was beyond the ~~reach of the~~ wildest imagination.

Our cigarette smokers were rich, gay, beautiful girls more interested in having a good time than acquiring an education. The other girls were impressed by their audacity but wouldn't have dared copy the habit even if they had wanted to. These two ~~men~~ stayed at the school only a short time but the excitement they caused persisted for years.

Though not a sectarian school, Allegh^Eany was conducted in the Methodist tradition. There were no dances since these were held to encourage sinfulness. My family were strict Methodists; I was never allowed

to learn dancing. There was a sect of "shouting Methodists" in Titusville. During meetings there were infectious waves of ~~emotionalism~~ ^{emotionalism} during which worshippers shouted, jumped up and down, rolled on the floor. It was called "getting religion". Our church recognized these emotional attacks for what they were and was somewhat scandalized by them.

When I was a girl no woman I knew drank liquor. The few boys that drank made every effort to keep it from being discovered. We had home-made wine at home for special occasions and every fall my father put a barrel of cider in the cellar. Selected apples were used in this cider which was allowed to become hard after my father had spiced it himself according to a precise formula. A pitcher of cider was placed on the table when company came to visit or dine.

Our household kept a single bottle of whiskey. It was for medicinal purposes and I never heard of anyone drinking from it for pleasure. Hence our bottle would last for months. Late in life my father joined the prohibition movement. Regretfully he gave up his annual barrel of cider. The whiskey bottled stayed but it was stuck far back in a dark corner where prying visitors couldn't see it and start gossip.

Families visited each other after supper but usually they went home by 9 o'clock. There were no movies, theaters or ^{bridge} card parties. We did have musicales and parties where games other than cards were played.

While I was growing up my mother wouldn't allow a deck of cards in the house. This was sound Methodist doctrine. After she became an old woman seriously ill my mother's doctor advised her to get a deck of cards and learn solitaire. He told her it would keep her mind occupied. She objected at first but finally consented and became very fond of the game. And her training didn't prevent her from shifting a card now and then if it would help her win.