**Marion Blake –** A nonagenarian reminisces about her life in CornwallBy Brenda Underwood

A soft-spoken woman with a quick wit, Marion Blake is by her calculation 14 years of age—that is, “if you use the sum of the digits method,” she explained, giving a glimpse of the teacher in her. “Anyone can use it,” she added, playfully. Using the traditional method of calculating age, however, she is at the midpoint of her tenth decade.

And much of those ten decades have been spent in and around Cornwall. Marion was born at home in 1920 in the community of East Cornwall which was a separate community at that time allied with

Milton and Litchfield. “Although we called ourselves Cornwallians,” said Marion, “we were attached to Litchfield as our children went to Litchfield high School.”

Photo by Lazlo Gyorsok

Before Marion was born her mother, Bessie Root, was a teacher at the East Cornwall School, a one-room school house, teaching children in all eight grades. “In those days, you didn’t need a college education to teach in one of the schools,” she said, noting that her mother started teaching after she graduated from Canaan High School.

At the same time, her father, Clarence Blake, was working on the farm of Jim Blake, who was Marion’s great uncle. When Bessie and Clarence met and married they rented the 300 acre Perkins Farm on College Street, so called because “Yale College owned many acres of land in the area for its students to participate in outdoor activities.”
Farming was a full-time job. Marion’s father rose before dawn, worked all day and stopped well after the sun had set. With four young children, Marion’s mother also had a full-time job. She cooked, canned and cleaned and also made all the children’s clothing. (Shoes, boots and underwear were bought from a catalogue.)

Sometimes Marion’s father was able to hire a man to help him. “At that time, there were a lot of young men without jobs. They would stop by the farm and ask, ‘Have you got a sandwich for a hungry man?’ My mother always found something for them. Marion’s father would ask the young man if he knew how to milk a cow. If he was interested in milking cows, he offered him a job and a room in the attic or the second story of the Blake’s farm house. If he was married he would be offered the “little house” on the farm. “We always hoped it would not be a family as our father let us use the little house which was bigger than the one I live in now for our playhouse. It was right next to the barn so we became great friends with the cows.”

Once the children were old enough they helped with chores but they were never allowed to milk the cows. “Dad felt that children around during milking time yelling and screaming would upset the cows and they would hold back their milk.”

Milk from those cows helped sustain the population of New York City. Milk from the Blake farm and other farms was transported by horse and cart to Litchfield where the 40 gallon cans would be loaded on to a train bound for New York.

There was always plenty of milk left over for the family though. Every Sunday in summer the family made ice cream. “Our job as kids was to hold down the heavy container once the ice cream started to form inside.”

Besides working horses the Blake family had one riding horse named Dick. “He was very much his own man and you had better not cross him.” One day Marion decided to ride Dick but as she couldn’t put the saddle on herself and her father was out in the fields mowing, she decided to ride him bareback with just a plain bridle. “When we got out to the road Dick took off at a gallop to the farm down the road where he tore up the driveway and threw me off into the spring in the backyard.” Marion was able to crawl out of the spring and was grateful that nobody was at home so she wouldn’t have to confess that she had probably contaminated their water. “Needless to say, I walked home.” Was Dick following? “No, Dick went ahead. He was the boss. No little silly girl was going to do anything to him that he didn’t approve of.”
Marion recalls that during the Great Depression people in Torrington were not just hungry but starving. Torrington was a manufacturing town and all its factories went “belly up” leaving no money to buy anything. There were no welfare programs in Torrington as there are today. “Even if there had been,” said Marion, “people would have been reluctant to accept charity. In those days people were very independent and wouldn’t admit to being poor.” It was at that time that Marion’s cousin, Virginia Root, the daughter of her mother’s brother who lived in Torrington, went to live with the Blake’s.

Living on a farm during the Great Depression had its advantages. “We were able to grow everything we needed and could have fed 30 or more people. Such bounty was recognized by the U.S. government and during the First and Second World Wars, Cornwall farms raised some crops for the army.

Although there are not many Blake’s or relatives left in Cornwall today, there are reminders that Marion’s ancestors populated Cornwall. Dibble Hill Road, a tortuous road for walkers and cyclists, was named after Marion’s great grandparents who had a farm there.

Her great grandmother came to Cornwall from Ireland when she was 19 years old in response to an advertisement for an experienced milkmaid that an enterprising Cornwall farmer had put in an Irish newspaper. “I thought how brave at 19. It didn’t occur to me until later that it wasn’t exactly bravery although there may have been some there but she and her family were starving.” This would have been around the time of the Irish Potato Famine.

Soon after arriving in Cornwall, that milkmaid met Mr. Dibble and they married and Marion is descended from the Dibbles on her mother’s side.
By the time Marion started school at 5 years of age her mother had taught her how to read. Marion tells the story of how it came about. “My mother and father’s only free time on the farm was after supper when they would read the newspaper.” Marion was interested in “this great big thing they held” which often caused animated conversation. “Apparently, I was not only curious about it but also a little jealous. So my mother decided that if I was so interested in it she would teach me how to read” And Marion’s first foray into reading was with… *The Waterbury Republican*.”

Marion and her two sisters Helen and Dorothy and her brother William, went to the one-room school house where their mother had taught. There were about 20 children in all eight grades. When Cornwall students finished eighth grade they either went to Canaan High School, Litchfield High School or New Milford High School depending on where they lived in Cornwall.¹

While William Blake became a farmer, there were not many opportunities for young women in those days after they finished high school. “They either got married early or became a maid for one of the few wealthy families in the area.” Marion and her sisters were more fortunate. Her sister Helen became a registered nurse, her sister Dorothy became a secretary at the Cornwall Consolidated School and Marion went to teachers’ college. After she graduated from Canaan High School, a member of the Cornwall School Board, a Mr. Swift, went to visit her parents to advise them that if Marion wanted to go to college, there were funds available to send her.

It was thus that Marion attended Danbury State Teachers’ College (now Western Connecticut State University). It was originally a two-year college and called Danbury Normal School but the year Marion started at the age of 16 it became a four-year college. “I don’t know why they called it ‘a normal school,’ said Marion, conjecturing as to the various reasons.²

Marion’s four-year scholarship paid for tuition, accommodation in a dormitory, and any books or materials she needed. In those days $325 would cover everything for a year. She loved every moment of her time there such that “during the last week of my senior year I cried the entire week because I was leaving.” Marion graduated at 19 years of age from Danbury State Teachers’ College.

Her first teaching job was as an apprentice teacher at the Colebrook School. She taught the lower grades at first and then expanded to all grades.

From Colebrook she moved to the Bethlehem School and then to the Harwinton School where she taught first and second grades. Harwinton School made quite an impression because, “it had indoor toilets.” Most rural schools had outhouses. “We’ve moved on haven’t we?”

Well, except for the North Cornwall church! “They refuse to consider indoor plumbing,” said Marion, “because they say the septic system would pollute the ground. Well, the cows are put out to pasture and they don’t have any septic system. So, what happens to the soil? I don’t dare stand up in church and say that.”

Christine Gyorsok, who has known Marion for many years, has always been fascinated by Marion’s vast knowledge of Cornwall and her insight into human behavior. “She is especially intuitive when it comes to children having been a teacher for so many years… She loves to see them enjoying movement and music and says we should never let a music teacher tell a child to be still while singing but to let them dance and sway.” Christine also said that “Marion detests the new education model which has every child plugged into a computer. She says she would have been fired if she were a teacher nowadays as she’d have them reading actual paper books and learning penmanship.”

And speaking of things moving on, Cornwall started to become a modern town when electricity was installed around 1937. “It was a major change,” said Marion. “Radio and television came along next bringing the outside world into us. My family invited the neighbors to come on Saturday night and listen to the program we all liked the best, Amos ‘n’ Andy. It was a very popular program but wouldn’t be allowed today, of course.”

But in those days, “we didn’t have anything like the wonderful volunteer work that we have now or the equipment for emergencies. And we did not have the influence of large numbers of city people with their new ideas and different viewpoints. We are not all farmers.”

When Marion was growing up there were often chimney fires. If your chimney caught on fire the whole town would come out to help. A telephone chain would start with that first call for help until “the whole neighborhood had their horses tethered away from the house where the chimney was shooting out great bolts of fire. All the neighbors bucketed water from the well and carried it to the men on the ladder. Although we had very few material things, we always had plenty of buckets which were kept right near the well about ten steps from the kitchen door.”

The newspaper was a vital part of family life. It was where they would learn about community gatherings, such as the July 4th celebration. Word of mouth would spread the news. “It was a little more direct way of communicating than we have today.”

Church was also a big part of social life. “We had a small Baptist Church in East Cornwall and after the service people would sit under the trees near the farm house closest to the church and have Sunday lunch together.”

“We kids made our own arrangements going to and from school. We would usually get together to play baseball in our long meadow which was flat. My father let us use rocks for bases; usually the oldest boy acted as the umpire because he would have had more years of experience playing baseball. We called it softball in those days. I don’t think our mothers would have let us play with a hard ball. And, what our mothers told us to do or not do, we did. Mothers usually took care of disciplinary problems; fathers were usually calm and kind.”
Raising the subject of Dr. Walker, Cornwall’s doctor for many years, Marion said, “You may see me start to cry because we loved him intensely.” Dr. W. Bradford Walker (his first name which he didn’t use was Wilmarth) came to Cornwall right after he graduated. Mrs. Sanford, who owned Rumsey Hall Boy’s School, went down to Yale to see if she could get one of the newly graduated doctors to come to Cornwall and be the school doctor. “It would have been a great drawing card for wealthy parents wanting to send their child to Rumsey Hall.” When Dr. Walker arrived in Cornwall, he discovered that the boys were very healthy and there wouldn’t be much to do and Mrs. Sanford agreed that he wouldn’t have much to do and Mrs. Sanford agreed that he could have a private practice and so he became Cornwall’s doctor. “Cornwall was envied because of their doctor and we liked being envied.”

Dr. Walker lived right in Cornwall Village across from the town hall. “He never gave the impression that he was interested in his profession for the money.” In those days an office visit was about $5 and often a farmer had to tell Dr. Walker that he wouldn’t be able to pay him until the milk check came in at the end of the month. “Dr. Walker would say, ‘Oh, forget it’ or ‘How about a bushel of potatoes?’ Find a doctor who would do that today.”

He had a wonderful sense of humor, recalls Marion. He and Katy his wife had three sons so if he was delivering a baby and it was a girl he would say to the mother, “Now, if you don’t want to keep her, Katy and I will take her.”

“When my father developed heart problems in his fifties, my mother would ask me to call Dr. Walker in the early hours of the morning and the first thing he would say was, ‘I’ll be right down.’ By the time I put on my robe and walked down the stairs to open the kitchen door I’d see his car lights. We were certainly blessed.”

For many years Marion volunteered at the Little Benefit Shop in Cornwall which benefits the Little Guild of St. Francis. She also enjoys reading and “is a very social person,” said Christine Gyorsok, adding that “Marion is one of the few people I know who does not watch television yet I doubt she would ever say she’s bored.”

Although she has seen many changes in Cornwall in her lifetime such that sometimes she thinks she has been transplanted somewhere else, “one thing that hasn’t changed is the neighborly spirit. I sense that it is still alive. At first, there was not as close a feeling for the people who came up from New York for weekends or summer, but that has changed.”

Marion remembers seeing many wonderful relationships develop between parents of the children who went to Rumsey School and local people. As most of us living here now will attest, those early relationships were the means of bring successive generations back to Cornwall. “I feel that when someone from New York buys a house in Cornwall now, they really have the feeling of belonging here. Living with people from other parts has widened our lives. I like to think it has widened theirs too.”

Cornwall, August 4, 2015

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\*Many thanks to Christine Gyorsok for facilitating this interview and to Raymonde Burke for reading the finished profile.
1. Cornwall decided to consolidate its public high schools in 1937 and purchased the 75 acre Lorch Farm between Salmon Kill and the Housatonic River. HVRHS opened in the fall of 1939. *HVRHS web site*2. A normal school is a school created to train high school graduates to be teachers. Its purpose is to establish teaching standards or *norms*, hence its name. Most such schools are now called teachers' colleges. *Wikipedia*