

Progress, in the Eyes of Virgie Wynkoop

A Portrait of Early 20th Century Living

By Barbara Glakas

Virgie Wells Wynkoop was born in 1878. She grew up on a farm near Oakton and later lived on a farm near Hunter's Mill. She attended Clark School, located a couple miles from her childhood home. She married Arthur E. Wynkoop in 1901, a wheelwright and blacksmith who later became a house carpenter. They spent the first eight years of their marriage at Colvin Run Mill and later moved to Pender.

In 1928 she and her husband moved to Herndon, first living in an apartment in the home of Sadie Detwiler on the corner of Elden and Spruce Streets. In 1932 they bought a piece of land and built their own home at 811 Elden Street.

For many years Virgie operated a beauty shop out of her home called the Elden Street Beauty Shop. Her husband died in 1937. After his death Virgie continued with her beauty shop business and also started renting out rooms in her house for additional income.

In 1973, at the age of 95, she sold her house and moved to The Hermitage retirement home in Alexandria, Virginia, to spend the rest of her life. Virgie passed away in 1981 at the age of 103.

In 1979 the Town of Herndon celebrated its centennial anniversary with a week of celebratory events. There was a Centennial Parade, a Centennial Ball, a Herndon House Tour and displays of historic items in the newly opened Depot museum.

In 1978, purportedly in preparation for the centennial celebration, Virgie was asked to write a paper, describing how the ways in which people lived had changed over the last 100 years. The manuscript she wrote was entitled "Progress." We are reprinting the entirety of what she wrote here:

"Progress by Virgie W. Wynkoop, 1978.

"I was born October 8, 1878. Being in my 100th year, I have been asked to write what I can remember as far back to the present time, some of the advances in how people lived and made their living in comparison to this time. I will try to begin in 1890 when I finished my education in a one room school, where all grades were taught by one teacher.

"There wasn't any high school nearer than Washington, D.C. I lived in the country three miles from the nearest school in an area between Hunters Mill, Vienna and Oakton. Where the parents of the children in that area of Fairfax County repeatedly requested the school Supervisors to build us a school, but refused to do so until we could prove we needed one by making an average. To do so they rented an old abandoned store house,

and in the crudest way furnished it and hired a teacher and had school there for three years.

“We got the school house but the good teacher we had in the improvised school went to work in the government, and the one they hired did not have any training in the normal schools. Where I would ask her something I wanted to know, she would say, ‘Well I just don’t know but will look it up,’ but never did. I took that for two years and when she was hired for the third year I quit. So you who read this will please pardon all the errors of all kinds. Thank you. This is the progress in schools until now from grade schools, to high schools, to college, then to many branches of learning for oneself for the business and professional life in the world today.

“We did not have Welfare, Social Security or unemployment compensation. People made their own living and helped each other when the need arose, in a brotherly way. I will try to write a bit about when they built their homes and raised their families.

“Most families owned acreage, some small, some larger, where they built their homes near a spring from which they carried water for all their household needs until they dug a well near the house. They walled the well with stone and pulled the water up in wooden buckets, with rope and pulley. Later they installed a pump and then they could pipe water into their houses and build a bathroom and a sink in the kitchen. But they had to dig a septic tank and line it with cement and bury porous pipes in a field from it deep enough so one could cultivate over them to absorb the waste instead of hooking in to a sewer like now, if one is available. And now water has many uses as power running machinery of different kinds. When they invented elevators, some were run with water pressure.

“Each farm, large or small, owned their horses, stock fowl and tilled their land with horse power. I will describe one or two crops from planting to harvesting. To plant corn, one of the main crops, the ground was plowed with horse drawn plow and harrowed by the same. Three rows were made by a horse drawn plow with one shear the same distance apart across the whole field. Then someone would drop 3 or 4 grains of corn in the same distance apart in the whole field. The man who made the rows followed with a plow with two shovels that was far enough apart to straddle the row and covered the corn. When it came up if there were less than two stalks in a hill it had to be replanted by hand and a hoe. When they came up if there were more than two stalks in a hill it had to be thinned. This usually was a job of the children large enough to do it. Then it was cultivated with a plow with two shovels, one back of the other.

“When harvest time it was cut by hand and put in shocks until they shucked the corn and tied the fodder in bundles with twine, then hauled in to the barn to be fed to the stock.

Each farm had a separate building for corn called a corn crib with slats spaces apart to let in air. Instead of siding the corn, it was hauled and stored in there.

“Now the ground is plowed with a tractor that pulls a plow that turns more than one furrow at a time and is harrow pulled by a tractor. The corn is planted with a corn planter. It is never replanted or thinned. When it is harvested a machine called a corn picker does all the work, cuts and shucks it right in the field.

“The next step in progress was when some had acreage enough they would build a cow barn and get a number of cows and start dairy shipping to Washington, D.C. by the W&OD Railroad. Then they built a silo by their barn consisting of a tall barrel like air tight bins. They planted corn in rows. After the ears were good size, but still green, cut by machine and cut in short pieces, stalks and ears hauled to the barn in large bins and blown into the tall silos that was only filled from the top.

“There were doors on the side and put in as they filled it. The ensilage was tramped down, as it was blown in they were covered. The corn converts through the process of fermenting. It was fed to the cows. As it was brought to them in metal baskets, they liked it. It seemed to take the place of pasture in the winter.

“When the corn was taken off the fields in the fall, the ground was plowed and harrowed and wheat was sown by hand. In the spring grass seed was sown in the wheat field and the wheat was harvested when it was ripe. It was cut by hand with a cradle, and laid in swaths to be raked with a hand rake, and tied in bundles with a bunch of wheat, and shocked in the field to be hauled to the barn to be threshed by the threshing machine. But it had to be run through a fan to separate the wheat from the chaff. This was done later by the thrashing machine that cuts and thrashes it right in the field. So much for progress.

“When I first begun to write about Progress, at the time I started we did not have electricity, which is such a necessity to run machinery instead of only by man and horsepower. But has been the means of modern tools from machinery and transportation. Trains first started running on wood burning power, then to coal, then Diesel engines, then to electric overhead, then underground cable, now cars and trucks and automobiles. Farm machinery tractors are run with the power built in their own engines. So much for ground travel, when air travel, when it took days to cross the ocean, now only hours to fly.

“I watched and marveled from the time the Wright brothers tried and tried to build a plane that would fly at Kitty Hawk. After his first one to fly, progress has kept improving until I saw a man walk on the moon and is still improving air travel, which now is as common as automobiles.

“Of course we know long ago when the wheel was invented it has always been so essential in many inventions and one thing we will always use.

“When I first started writing, in the county when illnesses occurred, if our home remedies did not suffice, one had to walk or ride horse back to the doctor’s house to call him to visit the sick person in their home. He would come by horseback in a buggy, carrying his medicine in this saddle bags or in the buggy. Babies were born into the home with the doctor and some of the family or neighbors. One doctor attended a large area. Few people went to hospitals, as they were few and far apart. Very few babies were born in hospitals as today most are. And few doctors visit patients in their homes. They have to visit him in his office or go to a hospital.

“People outside of cities raised their own meat and fowl, and had their own cows that furnished the family with milk and butter. What they didn’t use of eggs and butter, and chickens they raised, and they raised their vegetables, enough potatoes, turnips and cabbage, [they stored to] eat through the winter. The potatoes you stored in the cellar under the house. The turnips were buried in the ground. The cabbage were pulled up, nice heads and put in a bed and covered with brush and leaves. The produce of all kinds that were not used by the family were sold, and that was their ready money to buy other staple foods like coffee, tea, sugar and flour if they did not raise wheat and have their flour ground. And they had corn ground for their meal.

“They canned their fruit, what they did not dry. They dried apples, peaches and cherries. They picked huckleberries in the woods and canned or sold them. They raised blackberries, strawberries and raspberries, canned what they needed and sold the rest. Now you go to the grocery store with shelves after shelves lined with tin or aluminum cans filled with any kind of fruit or vegetable you could imagine for sale. Even canned meats and fish they refrigerated, bins filled with all kind of meat, fish chicken, turkey, duck goose and wild game, frozen. Then another bin with all kinds of frozen vegetables packaged. The refrigerator filled with milk, cream and all kinds of cold drink, butter and marjoram. Even dough in loaves or rolls, ready to bake. And almost any kind of food that you did not leave to raise or cook. Almost no incentive to do real housekeeping and more. Still is it called progress.

“The delicatessen even has the food already cooked, ready to serve, although, the modern homes are equipped with gas or electric cook stoves. The ones before were wood burning stoves. But now we have electric cooking pots, pans and skillets with electric coffee makers, and tea pots, electric refrigerators, and deep freezers. Dish washers, carpet sweepers, vacuum cleaners, and electric or gas operated washing machine and dryer.

“When washing used to be done with a wash tub on a [zinc] washboard by hand, dried outside on a line and ironed with what they called sad irons, heated on a wood burning

stove, on a table with an old blanket on the table with an old sheet over it. Now they have coin operated laundry mats where you can take or send your laundry and bring it home and iron it yourself, or leave it to be ironed and bring it home all done. Or some laundry mats pick up and deliver. They also have machines in the same place that they do dry cleaning. And now you can get your carpet cleaned on the floor, your window washed, drapes and curtains washed and rehung, your whole house cleaned by a company that is their business.

“It used to be that you fought flies all summer with fly poison, sticky ribbons and paper. Now the houses are screened against both flies and mosquitos and other insects. In fact, there doesn't seem to be as many flies as years ago. And commercial spraying has helped control mosquitos to some extent. Of course household spraying is still practiced.

“Brick, concrete block and stone are used more now to build houses, schools and public buildings, instead of logs and wood siding. Aluminum siding has replaced wood shingles, and asbestos siding has replaced a lot of the wood siding. It all saves so much painting. Windows and door frames too have some metal on some houses and other buildings instead of wood porch floor steps. And walks are made of cement in some cases instead of wood, both in homes and in public buildings. Now it is amazing how both cities are threaded with nice cement streets and highways, paved with cement. Where we had so many brick streets and even cobblestones, until they were replaced with nice smooth cement ones. In old cities like Alexandria, Virginia, there are still some cobblestone streets left in the old part of the city.

“They made some of the country roads sand and gravel but not anymore. Even the ones they did make was much better than the deep mud and dust. Many bridges have been built good and strong and lasting. Streams crossed many of the roads that were forded and could not be crossed when there was heavy rains and the water was too deep to ford. There was usually a foot bridge at these crossings during my first remembrances.

“There were so few jobs for women to work. They were supposed to keep house and care for the children, who now so many need a home instead of just a place to eat and sleep while their parents works. Is this good progress? Of course the parents have more money and are able to give their children more of this world's goods. But wouldn't it be better to give the children more love company and home life than so much time on the streets to mingle with all kinds of company and temptations?

“Now this is called progress, when the women can take the jobs the men used to fill and can at times receive more pay. So in some cases the woman works, the man stays home, keeps house, cares for the children until he feels so degraded he seeks other things outside. The children neglected. No one home most of the time, next thing a divorce

pending. Well imagine the outcome of some such cases, of course not all. But in many cases delinquent children and a broken home being one.”

Virgie’s document seemed to end abruptly and we wonder if she had more to write but just did not get around to writing it. Her “Progress” manuscript had been hand-written in a speckled green composition book.

While at The Hermitage Virgie began a creative writing course there. One of her fellow residents described her as being forever young, a creative and happy person. The resident said, “She remembers the past but she is not living in the past.”

In 1972 Virgie wrote an article entitled, “Going to School in 1888,” which was later printed in the *Herndon Observer* newspaper. In 1977, again in preparation for Herndon’s centennial celebration, she began writing a manuscript entitled, “Herndon, Etcetera” which was a detailed history of the Town of Herndon, as she best recalled it. She finished this 63-page manuscript in 1979. Copies of “Herndon, Etcetera” are located in the Fairfax Regional Library and in the Herndon Historical Society’s Depot Museum.

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.