

Long, Long Ago

The following article, entitled "Cranford Twenty-Five Years Ago," is reprinted from The Cranford Chronicle, January 16, 1895. The Chronicle had reprinted the piece from "The Arrow," a publication of Trinity Church in November 1894. The author is not named but is identified simply as "An Old Resident."

Notice the many interesting statements in the narrative: that the railroad gave the town its name; that Cranford had a boys baseball team in 1869; that singing school was held during the winter months; that there was a picnic woods where Holly Street now stands; or that there were no canoes on the river in the early years. The inconsistency in punctuation and capitalization is found in the original.

In these busy, restless times, when almost every one appears eager for a change, living five years in a place seems really creditable, while ten years makes one an old resident. So if the subject is brought up of Cranford twenty-five years ago, the cry at once is, "Who was here then?" And, in truth, very few of the old timers remain who knew the place in its early days, and before it could make the proud boast of being the Mecca of Brooklyn, but some of these are happy to testify that even then it showed promise of a bright future.

Cranford had but commenced life then as a suburban village, with a very limited number of commuters. As an offshoot of Westfield, it had been known by the name of Craneville, but its pretty name of Cranford had been recently bestowed upon it by a, for once, kind and discriminating railroad company.

In order to give a correct idea of Cranford in '69, first blot out most of the streets, and sweep away three quarters of the houses. Union Avenue on both sides of the track, Springfield, Elizabeth and Riverside Avenues on the north and Walnut and Westfield [now Lincoln] avenues on the south are practically unchanged. Alden and Miln Streets and Forest Avenue were only partially opened and were in that crude and miry condition that happily is only known by tradition to present residents. North and South avenues were yet unthought-of, nor indeed were there straight roads to anywhere.

And if so small a portion was plotted out then, what was the rest? Up on the "hill," meadowland and orchards; on the river, where Holly Street now runs, the Picnic Woods, the annual camping ground of the Sunday Schools and the delight of the children who would spend the day on the river banks with well-filled lunch baskets and fire, lighted gypsy fashion, for coffee, or perchance, taffy. Naught invaded this peaceful solitude, and even on the river the hush was unbroken, for what is now the pride of Cranford was left severely alone in those days. There may have been two boats, but rowing did not find much favor; there were dark hints of malaria and in the main the fish and small boy owned the river and held high revel there.

In '69, the new Presbyterian church, recently demolished, was dedicated and was regarded with just elation as worthy of the small but rising village. The old white church, with its three green shuttered windows on each side, stood by the big walnut tree on Union Avenue, exactly where Alden Street was afterwards cut through to connect with North Avenue. A little to one side stood the quaint belfry which disappeared long since, but the same bell still rings out the summons for staid Presbyterians. The Sunday School was held in the old church till funds were raised to carry

the building back of the new edifice where, in gradual changes and enlargements, most of the original has vanished and hardly a vestige remains now in the Presbyterian Chapel.

The present Methodist church, too, was not built until some years later. What is now the Sunday School room, which then stood on Westfield avenue, served all purposes till a more commodious building was erected.

Public School Number 9 existed only on paper then, and the juveniles of Cranford were taught in a small red school house which stood on the corner of Union and Westfield Avenues, and the building, changed as to location and purpose, can still be seen on Grove Street, near Walnut Avenue; while in North Cranford knowledge was dispensed in a building of two rooms that stood where is now the residence of Dr. MacConnell, and which, enlarged and improved, at present stands close by on North Avenue. In this building, the Township and Vigilance Committees were organized.

The commercial enterprise of Cranford was represented by one grocery and general notion store which stood opposite the station on Union Avenue. Here one could purchase a little of everything and not much of anything. Marketing was simplified in those days. Butcher and baker, there was none, and housewives were dependent on the enterprise of Westfield, from which place good meat was served several times a week.

One old landmark, however, stands still unchanged—the station, which owing, alas, to a no longer kind and discriminating railroad company, remains to this day the same modest but rather more shabby and battered building than it was in '69.



First two railroad stations in Cranford. The forlorn looking shed at left was the first depot, built in 1844. The two-story structure on the right replaced the original depot in 1865.

The place seems primitive, does it not? And it must have been dull, someone remarks. Well it did not have electric lights or city water or gas, or too many board walks or any stone pavements, and certainly the roads were not macadamized, neither was there a Casino, or a Wednesday Morning Club, or an Alcaeus Society, or an Opera House. But it was a good time for all that, when houses were fewer and the people all knew each other, and a new family was talked over before-hand with friendly curiosity and greeted with utmost cordiality; when the few joined hands and worked harmoniously and earnestly.

Neither were all pleasures and gayeties lacking though they might seem tame in these days. There were straw-rides in summer, and sleighing in winter, when the river also was no longer neglected but was visited early and late by the eager skaters. An occasional dance, too, was given, and surprise parties were not unknown. Nor was the musical education entirely neglected, for singing school was held during the winter months, and gave pleasure, it not profit. And let no one suppose that the time was when Cranford could not boast a base-ball nine, albeit in those days that honor was monopolized by the boys.

It was about this time that the last of the old-fashioned quiltings was given, when the sewers assembled in the afternoon and busily plied the needle till dark, following the circular chalk marks, made with the aid of a small saucer. Then lamps were lighted and the husbands and brothers arrived, and all sat down to supper, amid much good natured raillery over the interesting item that the hostess had transgressed an unwritten rule in giving five kinds of cake when three only were allowed. This mode of open hospitality was continued afterwards in the church sewing meetings for a year or two.

An old resident may be pardoned for seeing those days through a golden haze. But were they “good old times” in Cranford? Nay, rather, let the secret, an open one to all Cranfordites, be now published for the benefit of all favored mortals—the times that are not good times have yet to come to Cranford.