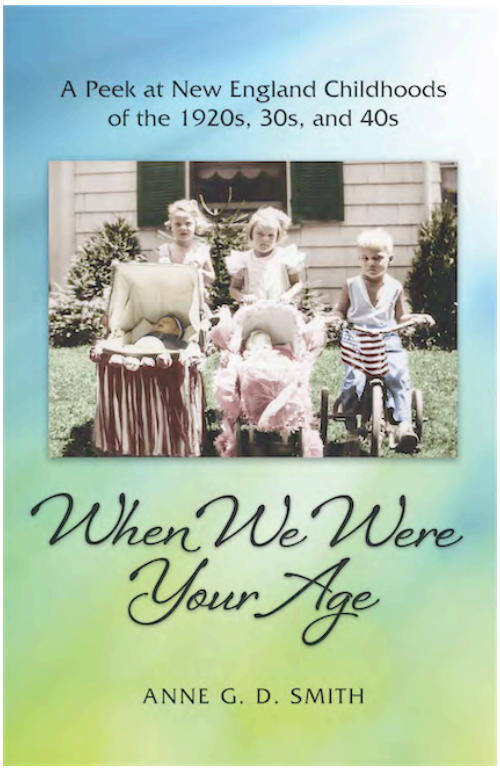

Meet twenty-five former children, aged eighty through ninety-nine, who have shared their stories of growing up in New England. Some did not speak any English before they started school. Hardly any went to kindergarten. And almost all of them ate beans and franks for supper every Saturday night.

When We Were Your Age: A Peek at New England Childhoods of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s

by Anne G. D. Smith

A Peek at New England Childhoods of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s

When We Were Your Age

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Front cover: Shirl, far left, at age 7 with her entry for the doll carriage parade [photo courtesy of Shirley Schofield]

Back cover: (clockwise from left) Ellen at age 4 with her dog, Polly [photo courtesy of Ellen Downing]; Edith at age 2 or 3 [photo courtesy of Edith Warner]; Vicki (left) with her sister Jessie, early 1930s [photo courtesy of Victoria Bradley]; Pumpie at age 10 with friends on a Sunday morning [photo courtesy of Pearl Perry]

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Once Upon a Time

"WHEN *I* WAS YOUR AGE, *Sonny-boy,* we *walked* to school. Ten miles, barefoot, in the snow. Uphill both ways."

When I was your age . . . We don't hear that expression very much anymore. On one hand, that's a relief. It was usually met with a lot of eye-rolling, especially by children: *Here we go again about the good old days. Bor-ing.* And who could blame them, if what they heard underneath the words, perhaps in the tone of voice, was *We were better than you. We weren't soft and lazy, like you.* Who wants to be told that? And how does just being born in a hardier and harder time automatically make some any better than others? They just grew up then; did what they had to do. On the other hand, if we never hear about those old days, good ones or bad, how will we ever know about them? How will we have a sense of ourselves as products of history, as players in history? How will we understand how today's realities came about? Will we see ourselves simply as meaningless blobs of self-aware organic structures plopped into a society for a short time without an awareness of where it came from?

The truth is, a lot of things *were* harder back in the day. But some things were *easier*. And an awful lot about childhood wasn't much different than it is now.

Children today have more comforts, but less freedom. More conveniences, but maybe more stress. Like almost all Americans before them, they argue with their siblings and complain about school. There used to be bullies, and there still are. There were kids who were nice, who tried to include everyone; there still are. There were some great parents, and some rotten ones. But mostly there were just kids and

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Ellie

Elvira Jessie Smith sat at the wheel of her father's pickup as it bounced along the road to Swansea. She turned to her mother. "I don't get it. Why don't you get your license?"

Mrs. Smith laughed. "Why do I need one, Ellie? I get along fine."

"Well, so you could go places by yourself."

"I already do. I hitch up the wagon and away we trot, the horse and I."

Ellie groaned in exasperation. "You know what I mean, Ma. Places a ways off, that take forever by wagon. "

"Oh, like high school games in Swansea or Somerset? I can always get my seventeen-year old daughter to drive me. She's terribly clever."

The seventeen-year old chose to ignore how lightly her mother was treating this. "Or even just up to the Head for a church supper or to visit your friends. Four miles, Ma. It takes you an hour to go that far. Almost as long as it takes to walk. It could take eight minutes." She paused for effect. "Eight minutes, Ma," she pleaded.

Mrs. Smith laughed again. "Exactly! Only eight minutes. I'll have barely started to enjoy myself before I'll have to jump out and be somewhere with someone, doing something, when I could have had sixty whole minutes to myself to just sit, relax, daydream, ponder . . . If I tried that at home I'd be thinking, 'You know you really should be cleaning all the lamp chimneys. Or mending the somethings. Or

tending the something-elses. Travel time, it's time off. Sixty delightful minutes up, sixty glorious minutes back.

"Well, when I graduate and start working, I'm going to buy my own car. And look! There's the field up ahead, and it took only . . ."

They were startled by a loud HONK coming from their left. Ellie jumped and glanced over. A convertible touring car with its top down had pulled alongside them, filled with her classmates. They were leaning toward her and shouting something. She started to roll down her window to hear what they were saying, but their voices were drowned out by her mother's.

"Don't let them get ahead and beat ya!" she was yelling.

"Honestly, Ma!" Ellie spurted as she pressed the gas pedal to the floor. "How about all your relaxing ride talk?"

"There's a time and a place for everything, dear," her mother answered, leaning forward anxiously. "Hurry up! I think we can still win!"

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Carefree Liberty or Neglect?

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, we got ourselves to school, friends' homes, movies, and everywhere else, on our own. We walked, rode our bicycles or scooters, or took public transportation. Only about half of us lived in families owning a car *or* truck—never more than one vehicle. Fathers needed them for work, so they weren't often available to cart us around after school. And though our mothers were usually home, most of them couldn't have given us rides anyway, since only six of them had driver's licenses.

Since most of us went home for lunch until high school, we got in at least four walks a day. Our schools were as close as a few buildings away, and as far as five miles. Those who lived two miles away didn't come home at lunch, but still walked to and from school. Some school systems provided school buses or bus vouchers, but we must have been "too close" at two miles to qualify. Only two of us, Ellie and Okie, rode school buses; Okie's was a horse-drawn wagon, and Ellie's did double duty daily as a farmer's cattle truck. But they lived quite far from school, in rural areas with no public transportation.

Although not many of us could remember how old we were when we were first allowed to play outside alone, some could. They remembered that they could be in the yard at two or three years of age, and

in their own neighborhood at three or four. Others simply recalled that they were "very young." The oldest age anyone remembered for this was five or six.

Negotiating the neighborhood at four and walking alone to school at five are no longer activities kids with "good" parents engage in; that behavior might trigger allegations of neglect, followed by social service investigations. But there is some controversy over whether our neighborhoods and towns are truly more dangerous now than in our day. We may simply have incorrect perceptions, created by media that inform us of every attempted abduction in the entire country and fed by a twenty-four-hour news cycle. Then again, those fears may be justified. Either way, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren do not have the freedom we and our own children took for granted in our childhoods, or the satisfaction we gained from learning how to navigate our world independently.

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Ellie

Ellie was born on her family's farm in South Westport, Massachusetts. Her father, James Smith, came to this country from Laurencekirk, Scotland as a young teenager with his parents, siblings, and extended family including his Smith grandfather and great-grandfather. They started farming in Westport, and by the time Ellie was born her father and his brother John had established adjoining properties on Horseneck Road. James, the family's youngest son, had seven or eight cows, three working horses, chickens, hens, and a pony, along with cash crops of beans, corn, squash, tomatoes, peppers, and turnips—Macombers, the local Westport specialty variety. He grew raspberries, winter pears, and apples as well, but only for family use. Just to the north of James's property was his brother John's Long Acres Farm, which has since gone out of the family and is now called Westport River Vineyards.

Lula Wilkins, Ellie's mother, was born in Stoneham, Massachusetts. She was the daughter of Elvira Lucretia Smith from New Hampshire (no relation to James) and Peter Hay Wilkins, both Yankees. Peter worked for the Boston and Maine Railroad as a crossing tender. Lula attended Normal School to become a teacher. She taught for a while, then did clerical work in Boston before returning to teaching with a post at the South Westport School, which was located on Pine Hill Road at the time. Lula boarded with local families: the Entwhistles,

Born *at home in Westport, Massachusetts in June 1914*

When I was your age, *I had to work.*

When I was your age, *my family always said, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without."*

What was your very favorite food to eat? *Baked beans*

Anything you didn't like? *Beets*

Did you or your friends ever eat out at restaurants or diners? *No*

You were not required to attend church growing up. Is religion important to you now? *Yes*

Did you ever address adults by their first names? *No*

What did you call your parents? *Pa and Ma*

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in school? *I learned to keep my mouth shut!*

What was your first job while you were still in school? *I helped on the family farm.*

Where did you go on your first date? *We took a car ride over toward Fairhaven.*

What was your first full-time job? *Bookkeeper*

What was your occupation for most of your working life? *I was a bookkeeper.*

Many things have been either invented or come into wider use since you were a child. What has given you the most pleasure, or been the most valuable to you? *Plenty! Washers, dryers, telephones, electricity, plumbing.*

What do you think you would most enjoy about being a kid today? *There is more freedom now to do more things.*

What would you most dislike? *Hearing all the bad news. It would be depressing.*

By today's standards, did you have a lot of "stuff" growing up? *We did have a lot of stuff, but it was the accumulation of past generations and it was mostly kept in the attic. I recently donated much of it to the Westport Historical Society.*

In general, today we have many more possessions than when you were a child. Do you think this has affected our happiness? *We are less content. We have much too much.*

Today we hear that the lives of many American children are very stressful. Was yours stressful in any way? *I had a peaceful childhood. I may have been stressed at the time, but looking back on it now it doesn't seem that way.*

Did you eat beans and franks for Saturday night supper? *We had baked beans with salt pork.*

the Lawtons, and finally the Smiths, where she got to know the young man who would become her husband.

James and Lula had only two children: Elvira, or Ellie; and Esther, two years younger. The farm's relative isolation meant that the girls usually had only each other to play with. In general, Esther helped her mother indoors with cooking and cleaning, and Ellie helped her father with the outside chores. At harvest time he employed hired help, but the rest of the year he and his daughter handled everything themselves. It was hard work, especially in the hot summer, yet Ellie remembers helping her father as the highlight of her childhood. They cut grass with a scythe, then carted the clippings to the barn and unloaded them. Ellie fed the chickens and gathered eggs, but her father cleaned the henhouse. She closed the barnyard gates at night and stashed loose hay in the barn during the summer. She also watered

the large animals, bringing first the horses and then the cows down to the brook and giving them about five minutes to drink. Then she drove them back, keeping them going and not permitting them to stop and graze on the way.

In the evenings, after chores were done, the family might listen to their battery-powered radio or play games together. Mr. Smith did not approve of playing cards, but they had dominoes and several board games which they often played by their own house rules. Sunday was a whole day off to rest, a chance to take a break from heavy farm work and housework. In the morning they usually attended services at Second Congregational Church in South Westport. In the afternoon the girls played quietly while James enjoyed a nap and Lula read.

Occasionally Lula took the girls to visit their grandparents and cousins back in Stoneham. James drove them in his hand-cranked pickup truck to Lincoln Park, where they caught the trolley to Fall River. From there they took a train to Boston, and from Boston another trolley to Stoneham. James normally stayed behind to tend the farm, but for Thanksgiving he made the trip with them. Peter Wilkins bought their holiday turkey at Faneuil Hall in Boston.

Ellie enjoyed working on the farm after school and all summer, or playing alone or with her sister, although she also felt isolated and lonely at times. Her favorite holiday treat was "getting gifts at Christmas." Ellie's toys were mostly dolls, but she had just as much fun with her "real" toys, the farm's cats and dogs. She also enjoyed playing her violin and ukulele. She and her sister played hand games like Pease Porridge Hot. Jumped rope. Sledded where their land sloped down to the east branch of the Westport River. Played hide 'n' seek. Picked wild strawberries, blueberries, checkerberries, and wineberries. Swung on the rope swing in the yard and the wooden swing set with two facing seats. Ellie never did go fishing. Not interested. She did like to explore, and once she found a still in the woods near the historic Handy House. (A still is used to produce liquor. This was during Prohibition, so it was probably in active use.)

At mealtimes Ellie had to eat what was served and finish everything, and there was no snacking in between. Mr. Smith was the first up in the morning, and he started breakfast—hot cereal cooked in a double

boiler—and then went out to milk the cows. Ellie never wanted to eat in the morning, but her mother made her. "She had to stuff it in," she says. If she was carrying lunch to school she made a sandwich filled with whatever was handy, usually sardines, tuna fish, or egg salad. Supper was after the last milking, at five or six depending on whether standard or daylight time was in effect. Occasionally her father would cook liver and onions for their supper.

The Smiths had neither electricity nor a telephone but did own a pickup, and Ellie got a license to drive it at sixteen. They also used a horse-drawn wagon or sleigh and had a pony cart to haul lumber and other small loads. The "fish man" came through on his rounds once a week, blowing his horn to announce his presence.

Toilet facilities were outside. There were two water pumps: one outdoors, used for watering the animals; and one at the kitchen sink. Water for baths was heated on the kitchen stove and poured into a tub that was brought into the kitchen every Saturday night. Laundry was washed in a big tub. Food was kept cool not in a refrigerator or even an icebox but in a "spring house." This little structure was built right over a spring whose flowing waters kept the temperature low enough to slow food spoilage. The kitchen stove was fueled by wood and later switched to coal. The only other heat in the house was from a coal stove in the living room that was removed every summer and re-installed in the fall.

Ellie didn't start school until she was seven. She went right into the second grade, as her mother had already taught her to read at home. The one-room South Westport School served grades one through five and was located directly opposite the end of their very long farm lane on Horseneck Road. It took Ellie five or ten minutes to walk there. After fifth grade she caught the school bus at this same building to take her to the upper grades in other Westport villages. Grade six students went to the Head of Westport, seventh graders to Westport Factory, and eight through twelve to Westport High School in Central Village. The bus was actually a farmer's delivery truck fitted with dark green fold-down benches along the sides. After its morning run the vehicle was used to transport cattle for the next several hours. Then it was hosed down before reverting to bus duty. At school, "the ruler"

Hmm…

Because this book is meant for people of varied ages, I have included ideas, comments, and questions for different interest levels ranging from child through teen to adult—from ages 7 to 97 and beyond. If one doesn't appeal to you, move on. Maybe the next will be fun to think about or discuss.

Once Upon a Time

Have older people talked to you about what life was like when they were your age? What kinds of things did they tell you?

Did you identify with anyone in this book as you read about their thoughts and experiences? What did you have in common?

Our New England (map)

Maps are so much fun to look at! Don't skip over this one. See where all the kids lived.

Kids Back in the Day—Ch. 26

Did it surprise you that more than half of the kids were born at home? It's rare now, but a growing trend in some segments of the population. Do you know anyone who was born at home?

In Our Families and Homes—Ch. 27

In some ways, the people featured in this book were very much like today's parents and children. But they also lived different lives in quite a few ways. Had you realized . . .

Rosanna—Ch. 10 and Ch. 39

Sixteen people under one roof. Interesting. Fourteen rooms. *Very* good. One bathroom. Now *that* must have been a challenge. If you had to share a bathroom with fifteen other people, what kinds of rules and policies might you have to have in place?

Responsibility and Respect—Ch. 40

Rosanna, who taught school for quite a few years, said that her students didn't behave as well on days when outdoor recesses were cancelled. Maybe you're very lucky and get several a day, like most of the children in this book. If not, do you wish you had more recess time? What's your favorite thing to do at recess?

Carefree Liberty or Neglect?—Ch. 41

If you have less independence and freedom than these children, have you ever wished you had more? Or are you happy with how things are? You could argue that children were in more danger back then, and you could also argue that we overprotect them now. Do you agree with one side or the other, or somewhat with both?

Ellie—Ch. 11 and 42

Do you recall what Ellie's "school bus" spent most of the day transporting? I wonder if the hosings got rid of the odor. Hmm. Probably not completely.

Rozzy—Ch. 12 and Ch. 43

Rozzy's home life was more complicated than that of almost all the others, due to her father's drinking and gambling when she was a child and his abandonment of the family when she was thirteen. Today, homes headed by single mothers are pretty common, aren't they? They weren't at the time, though. Most kids lived with both their parents.

Tom—Ch. 13 and Ch. 44

As a five-year old, Tom was understandably terrified at the prospect of being left in charge of his younger sisters for the evening. His parents weren't really as neglectful as it might seem, as the neighbors had been told and would have been available in an emergency. However, it's something that certainly is frowned on these days! It might even lead to the children being removed from the home. What do you think about their plan? Was it wise?

Edith—Ch. 14 and Ch. 45

Speaking about how we have many more possessions now than when she was a child, Edith said, "People don't realize that we can get along very nicely without a lot of what we have, since marketers have convinced us otherwise." I think she put her finger on something very important by mentioning "marketers." Can you think of some techniques they use in advertisements and commercials to influence us? If you can't, try watching ads with that in mind. It's hard to do at first, but see if you can learn to spot ways they try to persuade us without even using words.

Charlotte—Ch. 15 and Ch. 46

Does selling candy all day sound like a dream job? Maybe, but Charlotte had really, really wanted to go to college and become a phys. ed. teacher. Unlike Helen, she had nobody to help her navigate the mysterious process of getting there, and she became a candy clerk in a department store instead. Sometimes lemons become lemonade, however, as she met her future husband in that candy department. Has there ever been a disappointing event in your life that ended up leading directly to something wonderful?

Learning, Yearning—Ch. 47

Six of the girls spent at least a year attending a school where there were three, four, five, or six different grades within their classroom.

Do you think you would enjoy that? How would it make school very different for you?

Also, did you notice that over half of the boys—three out of five—stayed back at least once? And there were mentions of other boys who had stayed back. Yet only two of the twenty girls ever did, and for both it was because of prolonged absences due to illness (which was the case for only one of the boys). Certainly girls were also kept back a grade when it was necessary, but it was much more common for boys. It might be interesting to try and figure out a possible reason for this. [HINT: Look for information on brain development.]

Times of Earning—Ch. 48

Earning your own spending money has a lot of benefits besides putting cash in your pocket and making you feel more independent and grown up. It provides an education about life that you'll never get in a classroom. Many of the children in this book, especially the boys, had jobs even before they were teenagers. Thinking about those jobs, what do you think they might have learned?

Here's a Look at What We Wore—Ch. 49

Can you imagine playing softball wearing a dress? Many of these girls did just that.

Louise—Ch. 16 and Ch. 50

Louise was one of several who said she had loved playing outdoors and wouldn't enjoy having to be in the house as much as kids are today. What are your favorite things to do outside? Would you play outside more if your friends joined you?

Pumpie—Ch. 17 and Ch. 51

Pumpie was raised in a neighborhood in which everyone was poor but shared a feeling of tight community: they had the same values, and

every adult was their "parent" and felt free to correct them, or to speak to their parents about them. Your own neighborhood probably isn't like this, for many reasons. What are some of those reasons?

Walt—Ch. 18 and Ch. 52

Walt had a very caring sixth-grade teacher who went out of her way to open up a new world to him. She may literally have saved him from a life of crime. If he had had a different teacher that year, he might have ended up leading a very different kind of life. Her actions had major consequences for him. But even small deeds can influence others. And a kind word, or a cruel one, can make someone's day brighter—or ruin it.

Elaine—Ch. 19 and Ch. 53

When Elaine moved back to her Rhode Island hometown with her own children, she hoped that they could experience the idyllic childhood she had had. But although only about twenty years had passed, nothing was the same. We can't blame video games or smartphones, as they hadn't been invented. Nobody even had cell phones at that time. Or computers. What do you think might have changed to disappoint her so badly?

Vicki—Ch. 20 and Ch. 54

Had you ever wondered where popcorn came from? Now you know! Okie's family grew it as a cash crop, but Vicki's raised it for fun in their garden. *Lots of it,* she added, so they always had a "large stash" to enjoy. That makes me think about maybe planting some myself next spring. Maybe you could try that, too.

Sports and Pews—Ch. 55

Do you have a lot of fun playing a sport in an organized league? There are many benefits to this. There are also advantages to the way most

kids used to play, with no adults to supervise, instruct, or nag. The older kids were the authorities and the experts. You organized yourselves, and your game rules fit your space and your players. Do you sometimes get a chance to do this? What games or sports have you played like this?

News and Views—Ch. 56

What news stories have you heard in *your* life that you might always remember?

Shirley—Ch. 21 and Ch. 57

Shirley and her sisters got caught. Have you ever tried to do something you knew you weren't supposed to do? Well, of course you have. Did you get away with it?

Lucy—Ch. 22 and Ch. 58

Have you ever noticed how many fairy tales feature a wicked stepmother? *Cinderella, Snow White,* and *Hansel and Gretel* are three of the best known currently, but there are *lots* more, and the stories come from all over the world. Maybe one reason for this unfair portrayal—for there are many, many loving and kind stepmothers—is that it's usually very difficult and stressful to be a stepmother, no matter how nice you are and how hard you try, especially if your new stepchildren wish you'd just go away. It seems a little different with Lucy's stepmother, as she started off well, and everyone was happy. Only after her own children were born did she turn cruel. But Lucy survived, and she was very glad that social services never removed her from her home, where she had the love and support of her brothers and sisters.

Stillman—Ch. 23 and Ch. 59

Stillman sometimes got into trouble for talking too much in school. Ellie did as well. Does this sound familiar?

Nancy—Ch. 24 and Ch. 60

In Nancy's town, the Memorial Day parade ended at the cemetery, where the president of the high school's senior class recited the Gettysburg Address. Many communities across the country still observe similar traditions. Do you know why this particular speech became important in celebrating the holiday? If not, find out!

Claire—Ch. 25 and Ch. 61

At her parochial school, Claire was taught in French for half of every day, and in English for the other half. In this way her immigrant community maintained its identity without depriving its children of becoming fluent in the language they needed to succeed in their new country. Bilingual education is a controversial subject now. But one important difference between today's issues and Claire's situation is that *everyone* at her school came from a French-speaking background.

Rich, Poor—Ch. 62

Nobody in these stories was wealthy; everyone was middle class, lower middle class, or poor. What kinds of differences *and* similarities did you notice between them?

"We're not poor. We just don't have any money." This saying isn't used much now, as it doesn't apply to as many people as it used to. Those who said it viewed themselves as belonging to the mainstream of local society in terms of culture, education, expectations, values, and dignity. It describes several of the families in this book. The Depression in the U.S. had greatly increased the number in that position, as jobs disappeared and families went quickly from living comfortably to barely surviving. They became poor, but only in the sense that they had little money. Thanks to government entitlement programs, today's poor are usually better fed and clothed, and have better health care and more comforts, than yesterday's poor (or even middle class). But they are more likely to be culturally impoverished and live on the edges of society rather than in the mainstream, and in more dangerous neighborhoods.

War—Ch. 63

World War II brought rationing on many items, including gasoline. Children were already used to walking where they needed to go, or taking public transportation. But kids today spend a lot of time being driven places by their parents. How might your life change if gas rationing had to be brought back?

More—Ch. 64

The people I interviewed were asked to look back over their more than eighty years of experience on this planet and decide what was and what was not important. Just about everyone said, more or less, *and unprompted*, that **money was not the key to happiness**. They are passing this insight on to you. Treasure this gift by never forgetting it.

Hmm . . .

Many said that they wouldn't want to have to be a kid today, *but* that they did enjoy various modern conveniences, like dishwashers or power tools. Do you think there's a way we can take the best of the old and combine it with the best of the new?

What advantages do kids in your day have over the kids in the book? If you're glad you were born when you were, lay out your reasons for feeling this way. On the other hand, if you wish you'd been part of the generation you just read about, explain why.

MEET TWENTY-FIVE FORMER CHILDREN who have shared their stories of growing up in New England: **Ellie**, who hated breakfast; **Sonny**, who liked to skip school; **Lucy**, who had an abusive stepmother; **Shirl**, who soaped store windows on Halloween; **Helen**, who proved her whole town wrong; **Butch**, who posed for Norman Rockwell; **Pumpie** and **Bella**, who wore dresses made from flour sacks, just like all their friends; **Edith**, who won a bottle of cod liver oil in a radio contest; **Walt**, whose teacher saved him from a life of crime; and **Rosanna**, who gave up dancing, smoking, and boyfriends because she ... (you can find out in chapter 10).

Aged eighty through ninety-nine when interviewed, they were economically diverse and represented many of New England's major immigrant groups of the period. Some did not speak any English before they started school. Most of them took a bath only once a week. Hardly any went to kindergarten. And almost all of them ate beans and franks for supper every Saturday night.

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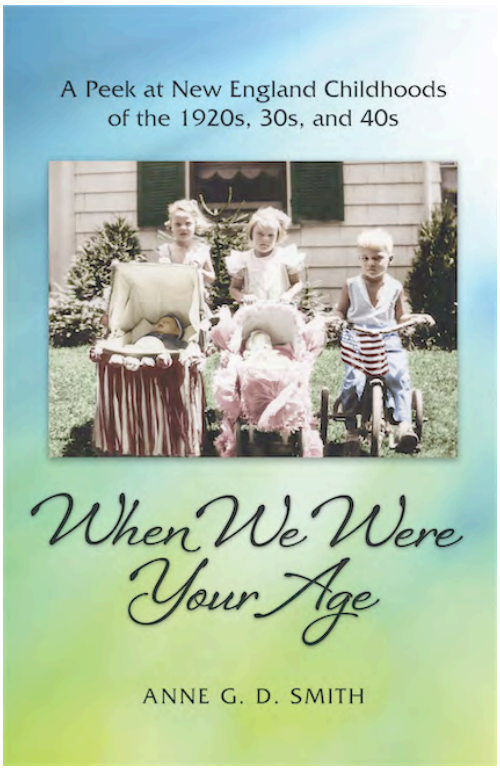

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