

## [Alan Wallace]

No.2. W. Mass. 1938-9

STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Louise G. Bessett

ADDRESS Brookfield, Massachusetts

DATE December 1, 1938

SUBJECT Living Lore

### PLACE OF INTERVIEW

The interview took place in Alan Wallace's rattletrap Ford in which he and the worker were rattling home from the postoffice. It was a cold day, the roads rutty and rough from the recent storms, but Alan drove fast maneuvering his ancient conveyance with the skill of an artist and talking steadily all the time.

Name: Louise G. Bassett

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Brookfield

Topic: Alan Wallace

“Hello, you're just the one I want to see”, so said Alan Wallace, as he came out of the post office with his arms full of a big box.

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"That's fine", I answered, "I don't mind seeing you."

"That's finer," he said, "Come along with me while I put this thing in the car and then I'll tell you what I want to see you about. Want to know what's in this box?" Of course I did.

"Well, I'm getting ready for Christmas and this is full of gadgets. I send every year to a mail order house for all sorts and kinds of tricks and then I start getting my presents ready."

"There's nothing like being in time." I ventured to say.

"Yep, that's what my mother always said, You see, when she was a kid - she was born - oh, I guess about eighteen hundred and fifty seven or eight, I'm not sure just when exactly but along there somewhere, her family made practically all their presents. The Civil War came and they couldn't afford to spend money on anything but food. The habit stuck to her and so, when my brothers and I came along she taught us to do many things that ever since makes Christmas to me."

Being of an inquiring nature I asked, "What, for instance?"

"Well, we boys, used to gather things to make fancy pillows, we'd start as early as August so when Mother was ready to use them they were dry and fragrant, things like fir tips, pine needles and sweet fern leaves.

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"It usually went to the seashore for two weeks every summer and half the fun of going was the finding of shells to take home to make into Christmas presents. We'd pick up the prettiest clam shells and scallop shells, a whole basket full, and then when we got back home, we'd paint them in the evenings - make ash trays, pin trays and - and - oh, yes, paper weights and sometimes door stops.

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“As I look back on it now I realize that some of them were pretty awful but Mother always seemed delighted with our efforts, no matter how feeble they proved to be. Honestly we got so we could all paint fairly well - you know, birds and butterflies and flowers.

“We had scads of relatives and by the time we had painted something for everybody we should have been fairly proficient. We used to make canes for Father and [want?] what an assortment he had, there was, of course, always a great deal of rivalry among us as to which cane he would like the best, so, to spare our feelings, he would carry mine today, Stuarts', my oldest brother, the next day and Jim's, the youngest brother, the third day and he would be equally enthusiastic about each one.

“We always [?]ave gave him something for his desk. He finally accumulated so many of our gifts he put a good-sized table in his room and all of our efforts were laid out to show them to the best advantage. I don't mind telling you we were mighty proud of that collection.

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“Mother taught us each to knit and I realize as I look back how patient she was for we were so clumsy - but we got so we could knit wristlets that really looked all right.

“I remember one night Mother had the dining room table strewn with clothes pins and some paint cans and brushes. She was making dolls out of the pins. She put dresses on them and she painted the end where the little knob is - that was the head, you know. We were wild to try our hand on painting the faces and she finally let us - we thought we had done pretty well but we were very crestfallen when Mother remarked that it was most evident there were no portrait painters in her family.

“We all three learned to crochet - and we had more fun than you can imagine crocheting ribbons to tie around our packages.

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“The evenings would fly by all too fast and how sensible my Mother was keeping three big boys so enthused over Christmas that they rarely wanted to go out at night. We were boys, too, real tough ‘he’ boys, and the funniest part of the whole thing was, none of the boys in the neighborhood ever kidded us. In fact most of them spent half their time at our house.

“Mother always caught the Christmas spirit early and she used to spread it around which made our Christmas last longer than most people’s. So many don’t commence to think anything about it until two or three days before Christmas Eve.

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“We used to cut our trees out in some nearby pasture and was that a ceremony. Sometimes we would spend weeks making the proper selection and there were many serious arguments before we were all satisfied. We would be all ready to set it up a week or ten days before Christmas.

“We decorated it with strings of cranberries and pop corn, then we’d paint silver stars and tuck them in and out of the branches. We put a few little candles, here and there. Not many, Mother had a deadly fear of fire. Everybody had a stocking hung on the tree, even our animals.

“We had our gifts Christmas morning but Christmas Eve we always had a ‘taffy pulling’. All our pals were invited, no one was allowed to bring a present. A number of the older people would come, too, and sometimes bring something for Mother and Dad, ( We didn’t call him Dad in those days . it It would have been considered disrespectful ) but they didn’t count, it was our party.

“We had our gifts early in the morning and then we’d pitch in and help with the last minute preparations for dinner and what a dinner it would be. The table fairly groaned as the newspapers say.

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“And no one seemed to hurry - no one rushing and dashing around like mad as they do today. Everybody was smiling. To Father and Mother , Christmas meant love and love means happiness - doesn't it?

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“If we can always keep the spirit of Christmas alive this old world of ours will never go entirely wrong. Always after dinner, on Christmas Day, Father would read Dickens Christmas Carol, we never grew tired of listening to it - we felt the Cratchit's, Scrooge and Tiny Tim were people who belonged to us and came to visit us every Christmas.

“After we had listened to the Christmas Carol and dinner was cleared away, we'd put on warm clothing and go sliding or skating, and would we bring home an appetite — you could hardly believe we had just eaten a big Christmas dinner. Mother'd have sandwiches and cake and we'd pop corn and crack hickory nuts and chestnuts and we'd sing everything we knew and Father would tell us stories that would seem unbelievably funny and how we would laugh.

“I have heard my Mother say that laughter in the house was more precious than gold plate. What a Mother mine was, there never was one like her.”

Alan sat for a full two minutes, looking off into space, thinking I am sure, of the dear days that are gone.

Suddenly, shaking himself, he laughed softly, “It's grand to have days like that to remember, isn't it?” Without waiting for my answer, “I suppose you'd like to know what's in my box, wouldn't you? Well it's more or less a secret, I'll show you some of the things when I get them together, they're not ready to be looked at yet.

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“What I said I wanted to talk to you about is that I want to give a little party Monday or Tuesday of the week before Christmas, will you come?”

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“Would I come?” Indeed and indeed I would.

“Well, I've got to get along, I'm leaving some day the week before Christmas, for Detroit - only be / there a few days - my brother Stuart lives there. He's a very 'successful' dentist and has a considerable amount of money. Think's I'm crazy because I dont try to made some but I'm happier than he is, I'll bet my hat.

“I'm anxious to go for two reasons, I want to see him, of course, but I'm itching to do some ice fishing, I'm hoping there'll be ice there, you know it's much colder here there than it is here. Speaking of fishing, I wonder if this will seem funny to you - it does to me now but - oh-oh how I suffered once.

“When I was a kid about twelve I fished in the ice every chance I had but I was terribly unlucky, could hardly ever catch anything. One day, I asked one of the town's best fishermen what I ought to do.

“Wal,” he said, shifting his very large plug of tabacco [tobacco?] from one side of his mouth to the other, “jest kut yer 'ole in th' ice, then put yer net down in th' water and s-let hit stay kinder long - then holler per net.’ Away I dashed - with this advice from an expert I was sure to get a big catch.

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“I cut the hole in the ice - I let my net down into the water, then, standing over the hole I hollered as loud as I was capable of hollering, ‘per net’, ‘per net’, again. this This time the sound I made was closely related to a scream - per net, per net.

“I pulled up my net - there were no fish - I wag bitterly disappointed and as I stood there it suddenly came to me that what he had said behind that plug of tobacco was, ‘Haul up your net.’ I could feel myself blush down to my toes and I was thirty years old before I had the courage to tell the joke on myself.

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“Well, that's that, I'll drive you home and then I'm on my way.” Dropping me practically in a mountain of snow - he waved gayly, “I'll be seeing you,” and away went Alan in his funny wheezy little car, on his way to get things “together” so that his friends can have a “Merry Christmas.”