(The Dark Ages” – 1944-1957)

Excerpt from “Mimi’s Memories of Childhood-

For my grand-daughters” Written on my 77th birthday

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Off To School: I headed off to a bi-lingual school at the tender age of five. The school was insistent that I was ready for first grade where English was spoken in the morning and French in the afternoon. My parents, both being of French-Canadian heritage, were eager that I learn the language even though it was not spoken at home.

Young children adapt easily and before I knew it I had learned my first French expression,

“puis j’aller au cabinet?,” translated, “may I go to the lavatory?” I quickly branched out from there and stayed at the school through eighth grade. I have had a love of languages ever since and know that it was from those early days that guided me along. In college I majored in French and minored in Spanish and became a French teacher. I continue a love of speaking French and use it whenever I travel and I love all things French.

At school we had art once a week on Fridays and also practiced penmanship. We were taught a handwriting technique called Palmer Method which was a beautiful script with a lovely flair. All students had a wood pen holder with a brass nib that was inserted into the tip. We all had our own bottles of ink and we knew we had mastered various letters when a plastic overlay was placed over the letters that matched up exactly with what we had written. Prizes were given each year for the best handwriting and I did win a prize now and then.

Lunch Break: I lived close enough to school to go home for lunch most days. For an occasional treat I was allowed to stay at school for lunch. Peanut butter and jelly or fluffernutters and bologna sandwiches were top of the list. Oddly, no one ever spoke of peanut allergies in those days and if I knew why I would be a millionairess!

Recess: Girls were obsessed with jumping rope, both single and double Dutch. We sang silly rhymes while jumping. For example: Strawberry shortcake, cream on top, tell me the name of your sweet heart. Of course, since this was Massachusetts, we pronounced it sweet “hot.”

Classrooms: Every classroom had real slate blackboards. Getting to be the student who cleaned the erasers was a treat and you either clapped them together outdoors or hit them against the brick building. Before copy machines, blackboards were used to write out tests which would be covered by roll-up maps. The maps were down when you entered the room and then rolled up when it was test time. The anticipation made it seem like quite a dramatic unveiling!

Going Home: At the end of each day, we formed “Ranks.” There was an older boy leader for each neighborhood who wore a white belt crossed over his chest to indicate to motorists that he was the leader keeping his charges safe. Sad to say I don’t remember a single girl ever being a leader but thank goodness that times have changed…for the better!

Last Day of School: For every child the last day of school is always a fun day. My school helped make it even more “fun” by requesting that you bring in a bucket and cloths to wash down your desk and floor area before saying good-bye for the summer. Of course, you knew it was your desk because it was bolted to the floor and you had the same desk all year. No one complained about the chore and it surely did help the custodians with end -of- year clean-up. It also didn’t hurt to teach kids some responsibility for their own surroundings.

I was lucky enough to have girls my age in the neighborhood and one who lived right across the street. Play was pretty basic back then. When the weather was warm enough, a blanket, some coloring books and box of 48 Crayola crayons would keep us entertained for hours.

Looking back, it was a simple time. I was one lucky girl to have a loving family, lots of friends, a school I enjoyed, a favorite cat for a pet and many family gatherings to keep me busy and entertained. As the old song says. “Who could ask for anything more!”