

Inside the Parlor

Manners and furniture were strictly by the book almost a century ago.

The old parlor was a kind of sanctuary for the home and kin within nearly 100 years ago.

The furniture probably included wedding presents given to parents or grandparents, such as large, high-backed rocking chairs with doilies on the back and arms.

There usually was a library table with a stiffly starched, crochet-edged runner and a leather-covered davenport filling one side of the room. The davenport could be converted to a bed at a minute's notice if visitors were invited to take lodging for a night or two.

The floor was covered with a hand-sewn gray rug carpet, made in four pieces so it could be ripped apart each fall and spring and washed and scrubbed on a washboard, then hung on the clothesline to dry.

Before the carpet was placed back on the floor, a cushion of about 4 inches of clean oat straw was spread evenly on the floor. The rug strips were sewn back together in place because they were so heavy and hard to lay evenly.

Cleaning the rug while it was on the floor consisted of sprinkling dampened cornmeal on it, and allowing the cornmeal to absorb all the dust. Then it was swept off with a stiff-bristled broom.

The walls were papered every 20 years or so with a quiet, not gaudy, design. It didn't matter that it didn't match because of the large framed pictures of relatives on the walls.

A musical instrument, such as an organ or upright piano, was often

in the parlor. At least one family member was trained to play the instrument. While he or she may not have been eager to play, play he or she did when kinfolk visited or for a party.

Lighting was by a kerosene lamp held to the wall by a bracket with a reflector behind it to focus the light where it was needed.

P's and Q's

Proper manners also were on display. People stood when older people entered or left, as a sign of respect, and you never walked in front of anyone.

Warmth in the parlor came from a wood or hard-coal burner that glowed red through the isinglass door, giving cheer and comfort to all. Burners that used wood were hated by the children who had to fill the wood box.

The parlor was seldom used, but when it was, children spoke only when spoken to. We politely answered each question asked of us, but never further, no matter how we were tempted. We were forbidden to introduce a new subject unless prompted by our elders.

If, by chance, the conversation touched on a topic not proper for us, someone said that "little pitchers have big ears," and we disappeared, not returning to the room unless invited.

If children were permitted to stay up until dessert was served, they then retired to bed quietly while those courting delayed a short time to visit, then climbed into the buggy for a merry ride home.

The code of dress was far from casual. Gentlemen donned suits, and Mother wore a clean half apron gathered and tied around the waist with pretty cross-stitches above the apron hem.

Younger girls often wore clean pinafore aprons over scratchy wool dresses and Sunday patent-leather slippers.

A favorite snack was cake and lemonade. Oh, how sour that lemonade was after a bite or two of two-layer frosted cake.

Children were never allowed to take seconds and were advised to say, “No, thank you,” and never, ever state they were hungry. This would show poor breeding.

No one ever revealed who was pregnant or who was close to the tavern door the evening before or any such gossip.

The parlor was just the place for a reviving and refreshing experience, a hideout from the outside world.

—Liz Lynch, Dubuque, Iowa