The first winter in the New World was very, very hard. When the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, there were no houses or stores. There was no place to live. There was only wilderness. The Mayflower stayed through the winter and the passengers stayed on board the ship.

The men tried to build shelters, but the weather made this very slow. The winter was much colder than they had known in Europe. Snow, sleet, and high winds battered the little ship anchored in the harbor. The Pilgrims tried to survive on stale food left over from their long voyage.

Many of the Pilgrims were sick. Many of them died, probably of pneumonia and scurvy. Scurvy is a disease caused by the lack of vitamin C. The Pilgrims had no fresh fruits or vegetables to give them this vitamin. Pneumonia is a disease of the lungs caused by bacteria or viruses. They had no medicines to treat these diseases. Malnutrition also played a part. Of the 132 Pilgrims and crew who left England, only fifty-three of them survived the first winter.

Eleven of the thirty-one children died the first winter. Fewer of the children died because of the good care of their mothers. Although the mothers were weak, sick, and hungry, they gave their children food and medicines they made from herbs. Fourteen of the eighteen adult women died the first winter.

Two baby boys were born on the Mayflower. Oceanus Hopkins was born at sea, just before they reached land. He died at the age of two. Peregrine White was born just nine days after they landed, and he lived to be eighty-three.

After two months of being crowded on the Mayflower, the children must have been happy to have room to run, jump, and shout. They probably explored the surroundings nearby, but they had to watch out for wild animals and Indians. While many of the children survived the first winter, many lost their parents. The orphans were taken in by other families and considered servants. Pilgrim servants were treated as part of the family.

There were no schools and the children only learned simple arithmetic. They learned how to write their names and read the Bible a little. They were needed to do work. The smaller children could pull weeds, gather nuts and berries, and pick up kindling wood for fires. Girls would do spinning, weaving, pounding corn into meal, making soap and candles, cooking, and baking. Boys learned how to fell trees, how to saw and split wood for building houses, how to sow and reap crops, and how to fish and hunt. The most important part of their education was learning how to make and do the things they needed to survive.

Pilgrim children created their own fun. They whittled toys out of wood and made dolls out of rags, corn husks, or pine cones. They invented games to play. They played a version of marbles called knickers. They also played a game like soccer with anything that would roll.

Fishing, clamming, and picking nuts and berries could be fun, too. Pilgrim children were up at sunrise, and in winter even earlier. Before breakfast the Bible was read, and then they ate. After breakfast everyone went to work. Before they ate supper at night, the children would recite their ABC’s and would be asked questions about the Bible. At bedtime, a parent read a chapter from the Bible.

When the Pilgrims began to build shelters, they knew they needed to plan ahead. They would be living there for the rest of their lives. First they built a Common House. It was used for storing tools and grain. It was used as their church meeting house and a hospital.
The weather was so windy and stormy while the men were trying to build the Common House that it took them twenty-six days to finish it. After it was finished, the men slept there while the women and children slept on the boat. Because of the storms, Captain Jones had to use two extra anchors in the water to keep the ship from blowing away.

They planned to build houses along one main street that ran alongside the town brook. It was the only street in the colony, so it was just named "the Street." The houses were not log cabins, as you might think. They were frame houses just like the ones where the Pilgrims had lived in England. The houses were built close together for safety.

The hall was the main room in the house. It had a very big fireplace where the cooking was done. In this room the Pilgrims cooked, ate, played, and worked. The chamber was a small room in the back of the house for sleeping. Young children often slept in trundle beds, which slid under the parents' bed during the day. Food was stored in the loft, and older children slept up there. Mattresses were stuffed with straw, corn husks, leaves, or cattails.

There weren't any bathrooms. Chamber pots were used, and they had to be emptied outside. Washing up was done with a bucket of water carried from the brook behind the houses. Their homes had small windows, but there was no glass. Glass was expensive and too fragile to carry across the ocean. So the windows were covered with oiled paper or wooden shutters. This made the houses very dark in the daytime. They had light from the fireplace and candles. The houses had thatched roofs made from bundles of dried grass or reeds.

They ate from wooden plates called trenchers. One side of the plate was flat and one side was hollowed out to hold soup. Children shared trenchers with their brother or sister. Children stood up to eat. It was considered good manners to wear a hat at the table. Clam shells were used like spoons. Since there were no forks, most food was eaten with the fingers.

Everyone shared one bowl for drinking. It might have four handles or none. Each person had his or her own sharp knife to cut meat, cheese, bread, and butter. This same knife was used to cut small pieces of wood. Dirty dishes were usually scraped clean and then washed in hot water without soap. Water for washing, cooking, and drinking had to be carried from the brook that ran behind the houses.

The life of the Pilgrims was very hard. They showed great courage by crossing the ocean to come to the New World looking for a better life. They risked everything for their ideas about how they should live their lives. They suffered disease, starvation, cold weather, and deaths of loved ones. Today about one in every six Americans has a relative who came over on the Mayflower.

The Pilgrims' Life in the New World

Questions

1. How many of the Mayflower's passengers and crew died the first winter?
   A. over one-quarter of them
   B. over three-quarters of them
   C. over half of them
   D. over one-third of them

2. Why didn't Pilgrim children go to school?
   A. There were no schools.
   B. They were needed to do work.
   C. Both A and B
   D. Pilgrims didn't believe in schools.
3. What were the two diseases that probably killed many of the Pilgrims?
   A. pneumonia and scurvy
   B. smallpox and chicken pox
   C. colds and flu
   D. measles and mumps

4. What was the name of the main room in the house where cooking, eating, playing, and working was done?
   A. the bathroom
   B. the chamber
   C. the hall
   D. the loft

5. What was the name of the sleeping room for parents and small children?
   A. the loft
   B. the barn
   C. the chamber
   D. the hall

6. What were the windows made of?
   A. glass
   B. plastic
   C. grass or reeds
   D. oiled paper or wooden shutters

7. What were the plates called that food was eaten from?
   A. bowls
   B. trenchers
   C. plates
   D. baskets

8. Where did they get water to drink and cook with?
   A. a brook behind the house
   B. a barrel beside the house
   C. the ocean
   D. a well