

A Salute to Elizabeth Catlow Rockenbach

By Diana Kenney

The month of May brings us Mother's Day -- a day to celebrate and honor mothers. Join me as I offer a salute to one incredible Crystal Lake mother - Elizabeth Catlow Rockenbach.

Elizabeth's maiden name, "Catlow", may seem familiar because of the historic Catlow Theatre in Barrington. The theatre was built by Elizabeth's brother, Wright Catlow in 1927 and is still in operation today.

Elizabeth Catlow married Almon O. Rockenbach, on Valentine's Day 1899 in Palatine. The couple settled in Lake County on a 160-acre farm on Milwaukee Avenue near Half Day. In their first decade of marriage, the Rockenbachs had five children; Esther, Robert, Ruth, Elizabeth, and George. During the second decade of marriage, seven more children were born: Joseph, Shirley, Raymond, Lyle, Mary, Rodney and Sarah. After that, two more children, Dorothy and Philip were born, making Elizabeth the mother of fourteen (yes, 14) children!

By 1927, the family made plans to move from their farm in Lake County. Almon O. Rockenbach purchased a much smaller 12-1/2 acre farm in Crystal Lake on Virginia Street near today's Rockland Road. Their daughter Sarah wrote down her memories of moving day: "George (18 years old) and Rodney (10 years old) drove a hay wagon loaded with furniture, pulled by two Belgium horses named Jack and Dick, carrying feed sacks full of oats and milk cans full of water for the horses. They set out at 6AM, travelling at 3-1/2 miles per hour through Half Day, Lake Zurich, Fox River Grove, and Cary. Six hours later they arrived in Crystal Lake. Robert drove a Reo truck with more furnishings. The remaining family members traveled in a new 1927 Chevrolet and Graham Paige touring car."

By the time the family lived in Crystal Lake, several of the older children were off and on their own. The oldest son, Robert opened up a car dealership, Rockenbach Chevrolet, in Grayslake, and was well on his way to success! Years later, his

brothers George and Rodney joined the business. In 1931, a second Rockenbach Chevrolet opened in Crystal Lake.

The Depression was especially difficult for the large family. Everyone had to work and pitch in. Almon became a truck farmer, selling produce he grew at a roadside stand. He also grew beautiful gladiolas to sell. The sons worked as stock boys in stores, and as farm boys, doing whatever they could to help. Elizabeth and her daughters earned money cleaning houses, cooking, or nursing invalids. The cupboards were often bare, but the family knew how to stretch the food they raised on their land. Elizabeth and her daughters canned a couple hundred quarts of peaches, pears, and green beans every summer. These would last through the long winter months,

In December 1931, the management of Crystal Lake's El Tovar Theatre announced a "Largest Family Contest". The idea was that the largest family to attend the Sunday afternoon showing would receive a ten dollar bill providing they arrive before 5 p.m. and register the number of members of their family with the doorman before entering. Is it any surprise the A.O. Rockenbach family won the \$10 with thirteen family members showing?!?

With such a large family, Elizabeth encouraged her children to stay in touch with each other. In 1936, daughter Mary started the "Rockenbach Round Robin", which was a travelling set of letters which would circulate from sibling to sibling. Daughter Ruth and her husband Phil Taylor lived in Crystal Lake. Phil liked to write, so often he would be the one to write long,



informative letters about how the folks were doing, who came to Sunday dinner, etc.

During World War II, many of the Rockenbach siblings and/or their spouses served in the armed forces. The sending of packets of letters became impractical, and so the "Rockenbach Rambler" was born! This was a newsletter that included the happenings of each member of this large family. Everyone was encouraged to

submit their news to be included in the next issue. An entry from the April 27, 1943 Rambler says, "Mom has been painting the kitchen ceiling and walls, ironing, washing etc. Pop has been raking the lawn, gardening, handing out victory garden advice. They entertained the Kelder's Friday night." All of this may seem a bit mundane, but to a service person overseas, it brought back memories of home and family.

The Rockenbachs lived many happy years in their family home on Virginia Street. Elizabeth Catlow Rockenbach died June 29, 1950. A few years later, Almon's age and declining health forced the decision to sell the family homestead, Their youngest son, Phil Rockenbach, subdivided the land into parcels, added water and sewer lines, and put the road in, naming it Rockland Road.

Descendants of the original fourteen children still maintain a family newsletter, once again known as the "Rockenbach Round Robin", sharing information and memories of their ancestors who made up this large, but close-knit family. To know your children and grandchildren will remain close to each other is a wish for most mothers, especially Elizabeth Catlow Rockenbach.



About the Author: Diana Kenney is Executive Director of Downtown Crystal Lake/Main Street, is an appointed member of the City of Crystal Lake's Historic Preservation Commission, and is President of the Crystal Lake Historical Society.