

# The Little Colonel of Virginia Street

by Sarah Belcher

As of February 1927, Lizzie and Almon Rockenbach and family lived in a huge green and white Dutch Colonial house on a small 12-acre farm on Virginia Street in Crystal Lake, Illinois.

Growing up was quite routine; life was not regimented but structured and orderly, following unwritten rules as if a "Colonel" were in charge. However, I'm getting ahead of the real story of "The Little Colonel".

During the school year breakfast was at 8 AM after which Ray, Lyle, Rodney and Philip tended to milking of one cow, feeding two horses (Jack and Dick) and feeding the Rhode Island Red chickens. The girls, Shirley, Mary, Sarah and Dory helped Mom get breakfast and packed lunches. About 8:30 AM we all headed out the back door through the field on a well-worn path to school. Rain or shine "Pop" as we all called our father only relented and warmed up the 1927 Chevrolet to give us a ride to school if it was raining or the temperature got down to near zero.

Mom had a tight rein on the home situation. She did the laundry on Monday and the girls did the ironing on Tuesday after school. On Wednesday, twice a week she baked bread, 8 to 10 loaves and two huge pans of biscuits, which we munched on about 4 PM when we arrived home from school. The biscuits were covered with homemade butter, which was made in a small glass churn with thick cream from our choice Guernsey cow. I loved the thick tasty buttermilk. We sold buttermilk to Mr. Scoville who lived on the north shore of Crystal Lake for 35 cents a quart.

Mom joined the Garden Club, the Ladies Aid Society of the First Congregational Church and the Women's Club. The family all participated in a hobby show at the Women's Club. Rather than go to the meeting empty-handed as she never had time for a hobby, she picked up a picture of herself and Dad and their fourteen children. This proved to be one of the most interesting and commented hobby as "perhaps these persons have constituted my hobby".

For relaxation she made crocheted rugs. I helped her by sewing strips of cotton which consisted of old shirts and skirts sewn together on the old foot pedal Singer sewing machine. When I was 10 years old one Saturday morning the needle broke off in my thumb in two pieces. Joe rushed me down Crystal Lake Avenue to

Dr. Alford's office to remedy that situation. We very seldom went to the doctor as my mother had a lot of wisdom handling sick folks. She had all kinds of home remedies but the best one seemed to be hot tea and milk toast!

As the siblings began to leave home to marry or enlist in the World War II Mom kept in touch with all by the penny postcards. She was so busy baking and canning there was no time to visit the neighbors so she would send Dory, Philip or me. We were sent to the Calbows on Woodstock Street or to Laura Fitch on Short Street or to Mr. and Mrs. Brush across the street with raspberries, beans or beets. Mr. Brush ran a furniture storage house in Chicago. He gave us a sofa someone failed to pick up and it qualified as a prop in the Senior Class play as the oldest sofa in town!

Saturdays were busy. My mother did not drive so she and Pop went grocery shopping, while each of us did one job without being designated or told what to do. Quite frequently Mom when she got home would say "I wonder what happened to the wicker chair", well, Mary had hidden it in the attic (two flights up).

Everyone had chores, but no lists were made and no directions given, but two or three hours later the house was clean, the lawn mowed and the farm chores were finished.

Doing supper dishes was a riot! Rodney washed and Mary and I dried, in between showing off what we had picked up that day in Owen Metcalf's gym class. Classes taught were the Irish Sword Dance and calisthenics. Rodney's most hilarious joke was telling Mary and me to put our hands on our hips and his remark "this is the first time I've seen an ole bag with handles!"

Then there was Dory! She mostly took a book and locked herself in the bathroom when it was time to do supper dishes. She stayed there until the dishes were done and then she came out to get to her homework.

In the summer Pop raised vegetables and sold sweetcorn at the North Shore Hotel on the north side of the lake. The hotel was near Clow Road which was off of Virginia Street.

One day he picked a bushel of green beans and then proceeded to go downtown. Now it's safe to tell this, Mom threw them to the chickens because she was too tired to can another bean and the chickens all lived!

Mom ran a tight ship. She was the only one in our family to have blue eyes and they were a controlling factor. Everyone shaped up and no one ever got spankings and no one ever heard of anything so pandering as being grounded.

We all were allowed to have friends in for dinner or overnight. Joe and George invited 12 people from the "Swedenburg" gang to partake of baked fish that they had caught at Spider Lake, Wisconsin. Well, we kept adding places around our huge dining room table to make room for all those who showed up. Mary invited a friend, Gunner from California as a house guest. After a few days he commented "Your mother really rules everyone under this roof with her eyes doesn't she, like a Colonel in the Army". So that's how she got the name "The Little Colonel".

Her authority reverberates even today. As I think of Mary and I walking to the grocery store across from McCormick Park on Virginia Street and a lady was driving a model A Ford and it sputtered so that we yelled at her, "If you can't drive it, park it"! And then as she passed us we saw it was Celia Edwards, a good friend of the family. "Mom is really going to lower the boom on us when she hears about this" we thought. But thank the Lord, Celia Edwards didn't recognize us.

And so the story of "The Little Colonel" lives on yet today.