

The Collins Family

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Arrival at Anselma

The Collins family moved to Anselma from their home in Byers in the fall of 1919. Mr. Collins and Ethel, his wife of ten years, arrived at the Mill with their three children Jack, age 9, Horace, age 7, and Mary, age 5. The children were excited about the move, and looked forward to swimming in the small pond beside the house. Mr. Collins had set up his sawmill and its steam engine earlier in the year.

Mr. Collins purchased the mill and property from Allan Simmers who held the mortgage. Mr. Collins may not have anticipated the sad state of affairs he inherited. Allan Simmers was unable to fix and repair things himself, and did not have the skills to keep up with the maintenance and repairs. The mill machinery required attention, the floor of the cider press was rotted out, and the mill race bank was broken out near the railroad bed. Mr. Collins addressed these problems, and somehow managed to provide for his family at the same time, possibly with the sawmilling business.

Mr. Collins had intended to use the water power for woodworking. Some of the farmers were grinding their own feed using small stationary plate mills, but they preferred not to do this. Instead, they convinced Mr. Collins to grind the feed for them. This required that he refurbish the feed stones because the surfaces had been worn smooth. He dressed the stones and made necessary repairs to the machinery, and was soon up and running after repairing the breach in the head race. He rebuilt the cider press and poured a new concrete floor under it.

Two years later, while grinding feed for a local farmer, Mr. Collins noticed ground feed dropping down under the feed stones. He discovered that the bed stone had broken. This required a major repair, and he ordered a new set of stones through a firm in Philadelphia. The stones arrived by train in a relatively unfinished state. Mr. Collins hired Lewis Knauer, an acquaintance from a graphite mill where he

was formerly employed, to balance and dress the stones while he rebuilt the beams and support structure for the stones. This consumed an entire winter, and Mr. Knauer lived with the Collins during this process. They were up and running with the new set of stones in the spring.

In 1920, soon after purchasing the Mill, a significant new technology appeared in the General Store: Electricity. This required that a generator run almost continuously in the store, and Mr. Collins thought he could improve upon this set up, much to the skepticism of the local farmers and residents. He acquired a 32-volt generator as scrap from a nearby defunct graphite mill, and a set of surplus WWI submarine batteries from the ship yard in Philadelphia. He connected the batteries to the generator, and ran the generator with the water power. He charged the batteries all day Sunday and used the battery power throughout the week. On Monday he ran the electric washing machine, on Tuesday the family did the ironing, and the lights were powered all week long. When the local farmers and residents saw what he had done, Mr. Collins quickly earned their respect and admiration; “if Ernie says he can do something, he will do it, and it will work well”.

Mr. Collins – The Person

Question: How easy would it be to pick out Mr. Collins in group of people?

Answer: Not easy.

Physically, Mr. Collins was of medium height and medium build. He was 5 feet, 4 ½ inches tall, and weighed 130 pounds, both of which belied his physical strength. When grinding feed for his customers, he first had to get the bags of corn to the third floor. He had the option of using the sack hoist, but that was awkward and time consuming. He preferred carrying the bags up the steep stairs to the third floor, one bag under each arm. His customers marveled that he could do this, because each bag usually weighed seventy pounds. He carried more than his weight in feed up those stairs! A closer examination of his physical appearance would reveal a badly deformed hand due to accidents. He had a large bone protrusion on one hand, and was missing the ends of several of his fingers.

Mr. Collins was anything but gregarious, did not like to socialize, and rarely left his home to do so. Although in his early life he was known to suffer mood swings and monthly fits of depression, in his later years his acquaintances remember him as friendly and well liked. Whatever Mr. Collins lacked in social skills, his wife Ethel made up for with her very friendly nature. She loved to greet customers and chat with them; he did not. Mr. Collins tended to be stubborn, and he was not to be questioned when he made up his mind about something. When the feed grinding business was failing, his son Jack tried convincing his father to purchase a truck with a hammer mill, and grind at the farm sites, the same capability that was leading to his business decline. Mr. Collins adamantly refused, saying “if they want feed ground they can come here”.

Mr. Collins was a self-made man. He was a carpenter by trade, and he engaged in that profession before coming to the mill. He had an incredibly broad range of mechanical skills. He was as adept repairing wooden furniture or building a wooden water wheel with his woodworking machinery as he was turning out metal parts using one of his several metal lathes or his milling machine. In fact, half of his woodworking and metalworking machinery was home made. He was a self-proclaimed “jack of all trades”. Although his formal education was limited to the eighth grade, he pursued correspondence courses later in life.

The Collins Family Enterprises

Given the community awareness of Mr. Collins’ many talents, it is easy to overlook the role his family played in his businesses. He would not have succeeded with his saw milling, grist milling, cider pressing and post office businesses were it not for his family’s involvement. These were, truly, family businesses. A case in point was the saw milling. Running the saw mill required four people. The “entry level” job was to haul away the saw dust to the saw dust pit using a wheel barrow. A second person was the “off-bearer”, one who removes the cut lumber off the head blocks. Horace progressed to off-bearer, and Mary took over his job removing saw dust. The steam engine had to be continuously stoked with cut slab wood, and that was Jack’s job. Of course, Mr. Collins was the fourth person, and he ran the saw mill. Mary fondly remembers

watching her father calculate in his head each setting of the set works to cut the exact number and thickness of the boards that the customer wanted. Work began at eight o'clock in the morning, and continued until three o'clock in the afternoon, at which point everyone was exhausted. Later on, Mr. Collins purchased a portable saw mill and a steam traction engine to run it. He took the portable mill around the countryside to saw lumber at the customer's site. This required paid help, and because of this, his portable saw milling business probably was not profitable. He finally sold the traction engine and saw mill.

Allan Simmers installed the cider press which he purchased from Syracuse, New York, probably in the 1890 timeframe. Interestingly, he claimed that there had been one previously, a large single wooden screw machine with a pole pulled by a horse or mule. In the autumn, cider pressing was a very lucrative business for the Collins family, and one which required their participation. First, the apples had to be fed to a grinder at the appropriate feed rate, then Mr. Collins would shovel them on to the press table and carefully fold a burlap cloth over them. This process was repeated for each layer until eight to ten layers were set in place. Then Mr. Collins would lower the press to compress the apples and extract the juice. Finally, the spent apples would be carted away and dumped. Often, Mr. Collins and his family worked until eleven o'clock at night to keep up with the volume of apples in carts lined up along the driveway. Of course, the cider business reached its peak during prohibition, and it was known that Mr. Collins made and sold hard cider. One unfortunate ramification of this was that the wives of those who purchased hard cider blamed Mr. Collins for their spouses' inebriation. The cider business declined significantly after Prohibition, and Mr. Collins sold the press sometime later.

Generally, the grist mill feed business was seasonal, running from November to May. (The Collins family never made flour, nor did their predecessor.) During its busiest periods the mill often ran twenty four hours a day to keep up with the demand for feed. During these busy times Mr. Collins ran the mill during the day, and the boys would work four-hour evening shifts when they came home from school. Mr. Collins and his two sons all agree that the most demanding and least

favorable of all the work associated with the grist mill was dressing the stones. Typically, this was done twice each season, and took a week and a half to complete each time. There were other maintenance jobs associated with the mill, notably, replacing worn and broken cogs and rounds in the gears.

In 1933 the job of Postmaster for the Anselma post office became available, and Ethel Collins encouraged Mr. Collins to take the exam. The local politicians also encouraged him to take the exam because they wanted a Democrat to hold this position, and Mr. Collins was a Democrat. He did not want to do it, but at their insistence he took the exam, and evidently he passed. While Mr. Collins was nominally the new Postmaster, Ethel did all the work. Even Mary learned how to do the basic tasks. Later on, this became a salaried job with a pension. Mr. Collins held the position of Postmaster for Anselma until his retirement in 1958. He was seventy years old. He contacted the Postmaster General in Washington DC requesting an extension to age 75, but the Postmaster General turned down the request and closed the post office.

The Collins Family Life

It would seem that life must have been somewhat crowded in their little house by the mill with two adults and three children living under one roof, but nobody ever complained. Compounding the problem was the fact that they frequently had a boarder living in their midst, either someone there to help Mr. Collins with the mill, or someone working at the Supplee Milk Company. In these cases, Mary was asked to relinquish her room on the second floor to the boarder, and sleep on a cot in the attic. To further appreciate the Collins' domestic environment, it should be noted that while there was always electricity, there was never any plumbing in the house all the time that the children and boarders lived there. It was many years later, after 1958, that the post office was removed and Mr. Collins built the addition with indoor plumbing. At that time only he and his second wife Mabel lived in the house.

Outside the house, the Collins family had a one-acre garden on the far side of the mill pond. Ethel loved to garden, and she had flower gardens behind the house

and beside the spring house. They had a horse, a cow and chickens. They attempted hogs, but that was an unsuccessful venture, and they finally sold them. Although Mr. Collins was raised on a farm, and worked on a farm, he did not enjoy farming. The children have fond memories of swimming in the small pond in the summer and skating on both ponds in the winter. Jack and Horace frequently fished in the large pond. Mr. Collins kept a boat with an outboard motor in the head race for boat rides along the race and out to the large pond.

With so much attention focused on Mr. Collins and the mill, rarely is there any appreciation of the artistic talents of the family members, including that of Mr. Collins himself. They were all talented musicians. Mr. Collins played the cornet, Ethel played the piano and organ, Mary played the piano and violin, and Jack played the cornet and trumpet. The family enjoyed playing together, and music was a source of recreation for them. Mary was encouraged to attend the Curtis Institute, but her father was unable to pay for her education there. She gave piano lessons until very late in her life. The Vincent Baptist Church on Yellow Springs Road was the center of their musical enjoyment, and Jack played the cornet and Mary played the violin in the church band. Jack and Mary played in the West Chester High School band and orchestra.

The Collins children began school at the one-room schoolhouse across the road, Franklin Hall, for the first through the sixth grades. For seventh and eighth grade they walked two miles to the school in Chester Springs, near what is now the post office. For high school they took a bus to West Chester High School.

Both Jack and Horace worked hard before and after school from middle school age and beyond. Typical after school activities included cutting slab wood from the saw mill, or from railroad ties, for firewood for their home, or helping their father with the cider press, or helping him dress the mill stones during the fall or winter. Horace worked at George Opperman's store at the corner of what is now Route 401 and Route 113 before and after school. He arrived at the store at 6:00 and worked until 7:30, then walked two miles to school. After school he walked back to the store and worked until 6:00. He worked all day Saturday, and

received five dollars for the entire week's work. Both he and Jack frequently worked at the Supplee Milk Company. During the summer they worked on neighboring farms.

Unlike her brothers, Mary led a very sheltered life. She was the first girl to be born in the family for a very long time, and her parents were probably overly protective. Her father paid extra attention to her safety when working in the saw mill, and she was never permitted off the premises, not even for a short Sunday walk. Mary felt guilty that she never worked outside their home as her brothers did, but Mr. Collins preferred that she remain at home. Finally, she did respond to an ad in the paper seeking live-in help, and she was accepted for the job. Three months later she became distressed when the man of the house was cheating on his wife and began making advances on her, at which point she quit the job and returned home. Besides her piano teaching, this was the only job Mary ever had.

There is no record that the Collins family ever took vacation trips together, probably because Mr. Collins always preferred staying home. The family did make regular trips to East Nantmeal to visit his parents every other weekend. Discussions concerning visits to Ethel's parents were always contentious. Sunday was an opportunity for Ethel and the children to attend church at the Vincent Baptist Church. The children walked to and from church. Ethel taught Sunday school and rode to the church by horse since she did not drive. Mr. Collins and his sons made occasional trips to Philadelphia, and they made one notable trip to Washington DC to visit the Smithsonian and the National Monument. On one occasion, Mr. Collins visited his brother in Montreal.

Little is known about holiday celebrations in the Collins family except that Santa Claus probably played a less significant role than in other families, probably because they had little money to spend. Whatever the children wanted for Christmas had to come from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue or, in the boys' case, they could have whatever they wanted as long as they made it themselves.

Changes

It is difficult to comprehend the extraordinary number of changes that occurred in the Anselma community and in the Collins family in the short period from 1933 to 1935. The ice house and creamery, which had been in business since 1862, closed. Passenger service on the Pickering Valley Railroad was discontinued. The general store went into bankruptcy, although it continued to operate on a limited basis. Mr. Collins stopped producing feed. While some of these changes resulted from the Great Depression, most of the changes resulted from changes in transportation. It became more economical to haul milk and other goods by truck rather than by rail. Mobile mills on trucks replaced the grist mill. It became more convenient for people to drive to their destination rather than take the train. The Collins family experienced changes in addition to, and totally unrelated to these. In this two year period all three children left home to pursue employment and their individual married lives.

Fortunately, Mr. Collins anticipated the changes in his feed business, and transitioned easily to farm equipment repair and sharpening services. He could be described as a "country mechanic". He rebuilt farm machinery, farm wagons and truck bodies. He repaired and sharpened lawn mowers. He even balanced and dressed stones trucked in from other mills. He made a water wheel shaft and a prefabricated water wheel for a nearby mill, and made cogs and rounds for the Thomas Mill in Exton. For the next twenty-five years he engaged in these and similar activities until his retirement in 1958. In later years, he was probably best known in the community for sharpening reel lawn mowers and giving haircuts at very reasonable prices.

Mr. Collins experienced changes in his personal life as well. Ethel died in 1939, after a five-year illness, at the young age of 49. He was remarried in 1941 to Mabel Pennypacker, his house keeper.

Postscript

Of the three children, Jack probably came the closest to inheriting his father's skills. He built himself a lathe, and set up a shop in the third floor of the mill, even after he was married and living elsewhere. The lathe can be seen there today. Jack had a very successful career at the Downingtown Manufacturing Company, and was the supervisor for one of the Mill's volunteers.

Horace worked nearly forty years at the Sun Ship Company in Chester. He often came home to help his father with his lawn mower repair. Horace would dismantle the mowers for Mr. Collins to sharpen, then return and reassemble them. As Mr. Collins grew older, Horace came to care for him, and finally came to live with him in the Collins' house.

Mary Collins married Clyde Griffith and lived at the Griffith's farm just north of Ludwig's corner on Route 100. She frequently came to care for her mother who was ill until she passed away in 1939. Mary's daughters, Janice and Elaine, recount many interesting and humorous stories about their grandfather, such as his addiction to soap operas and his financial investments which he kept secret from his wife.

Mr. Collins will always be remembered for his incredible range of mechanical skills. Long after his retirement he would spend almost every day building things and tinkering in his shop or in his garage. He continued sharpening lawn mowers and giving haircuts to long time customers in his later years. Local friends remember him affectionately as Ernie, or Pop Collins. Mr. Collins died in 1982 at the age of ninety-four.