

Memories of Colebrook – Sally (Jackson) Gray

We moved to Colebrook in late August of 1953. The summer was idyllic; while mother slapped up wallpaper in our new house, I wandered the fields and climbed the trees.

I started fourth grade in September. Going to a new school was tough. I was super shy, and tried very hard to do everything right. One day an older boy sitting behind me on the bus yanked hard on my hair. I tried not to cry, but couldn't help it. A neighbor boy, several years older than I, didn't like something I said; he grabbed me by the back of the neck and shoved my head into a snow bank. I never told my parents about these incidents. They worked 12-hour days and communication at home was virtually nonexistent.

Then came the summer of '54; I had no close friends at that point in my life, but I enjoyed my lone explorations into the countryside. One warm day I walked up out dead-end road, intending to explore the Algonquin State Forest. At the house next door, which had been vacant all winter, was a car. Clearly there were people inside. I could see them through the window.

I didn't stop in that day, but the next day I couldn't keep myself from heading up the road to see if those mysterious new neighbors were outside. On the wide porch, which ran along two sides of the house, was a sign. It read, "Deer Haven." And sitting in brightly colored metal chairs were two adults. I wondered would they be annoyed that a ten year old was standing in front of their house, looking a bit forlorn?

"Hello!" called the lady. "What's your name?"

"Come on in!" added the man. "Have a seat!"

Their names were Helge and Elsie, and right at the start, they treated me like an adult. We conversed about all sorts of things. I NEVER wanted to go home! Helge showed me two huge, pillowed hammocks on the side porch. "Try one," he said, and I did.

I spent much of that summer on Helge and Elsie's porch, lying in the hammock reading, or sitting with them and chatting in what I thought was a very grown-up way, about all sorts of topics. In fact, I spent several summers on that porch. My sister discovered Deer Haven too, and I was only mildly miffed at this.

One day the following summer my dear friends gave my sister and me a birthday party, though neither of us had a summer birthday. My parents were invited, too. I think they were a bit bewildered by all the attention being showered on their children! Helge, an imposing figure of a man, regaled my parents with glamorous stories of his life – meeting and befriending Haile Selassie; traveling around the world; making, losing, and again making a large fortune by – well, I don't remember paying any attention to HOW. All I cared about was that they really liked ME!

Helge also mentioned that a snake lived in their attic, keeping the rodent population down. I guess I believed everything Helge said, though I never saw the creature.

Elsie was a teacher in Long Island, and in later years we would discuss such topics as the importance of education. She and Helge had no children. They didn't have the same last name –

were they even married? I never knew, nor did the question ever cross my mind. “We must, ALL of us, educate the children”, Elsie always insisted.

I suppose when I started dating, sophomore year in high school, I began spending less time at Deer Haven. Helge died during my senior year. In the intervening years, Elsie and I kept in touch, though we seldom saw each other.

When Elsie retired in the late 70s, I was excited. Though I was busy with three young children, she and I still managed to get together occasionally for coffee. Alas, this wasn't to last. She had been retired for perhaps a year when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Despite surgery, she didn't live much longer. I felt her loss acutely.

At a time when I was a lost and lonely child, these two dear people befriended me and made me feel that I was valued and worthy of love. Of course I didn't realize this until much later on, but oh! How much I appreciated their efforts!

Colebrook Store Memories

I was 10 and my sister was 3 when our parents bought the Colebrook Store; Dad tore out shelves and redesigned the entire layout. I have old photos that show what looks like an incredible inventory of everything imaginable. My sister handed out Eskimo Pies and candy bars to her little friends, and I ate my way thru a variety of treats. Mason Hale, a Colebrook farmer, called my father “Jack”, for our name was Jackson. I hadn't heard that name at all since we'd moved out of Barkhamsted, where just about everyone had called him “Jack”. I liked the sound of it.

On Colebrook Fair day, we ran thru lots of coins, tossing wooden rings and hurling softballs at the game booths. When we ran out of coins, we dashed across the street to the store for more. Dad never said no.

Some days I played in the brook at the top of Mt. Pisgah Rd., other days I explored the store. The second floor had once been the previous owner's apartment. It was in great disarray and fascinating to a child. I found a stack of “Etude” magazines, filled with very old, once-popular sheet music. Oh, how I wish I still had them!

The post office was a small addition to the store. Blanche Turbarg was the postmistress, followed a few years later by Julia Wharton. In those days, Postmistress was an acceptable form of address.

After my 12th birthday, I was allowed to go home after school, and I often did just that. But occasionally I liked hanging around the store. We ran a paper route, delivering the *Winsted Evening Citizen* to a dozen or more people who lived along our route up Beech Hill. When I got my driver's license at age 16, I found that often I was the paper deliverer. I also delivered groceries. Especially I remember delivering to Miss Stillman, our neighbor on Chapin Hill, who was elderly and eccentric, and kept her grocery money hidden in stacks of newspapers. Mrs. Jacobs lived in the other direction from the store, off RT. 44, and kept a smelly house and an even smellier old dog – how I hated delivering groceries to her!

One day my boyfriend and I were horsing around in the back of the store. He started to chase me, and I picked up the meat cleaver and kiddingly waved it at him. Jimmy grabbed the blade and sliced open the palm of his hand! Mother had to rush him to Winsted to be sewn back together. I felt terrible, but I can't remember if I apologized for my foolishness.

Occasionally I did homework in the back of the store, next to the big boxy stove. It was fun to watch and see who came in next! Mt parents were quiet people, and the store was our social center.

Soon after Dad had his heart attack in the fall of 1960, my mother also became ill. Suddenly I found myself, at age 16, running the store after school. A family friend ran it during the day, then left for his second shift job as soon as I arrived on the bus. Since we sold beer, and I was under age, each afternoon an adult volunteer stayed with me while I rang out customers. I really don't remember feeling resentful that I had to spend my time this way, but years later I looked back on that time and wondered why it was referred to as "sweet sixteen".

I think Dad must have hoped that he would get better as time went on, but that wasn't meant to be, and in 1963, he and mother sold the store. I was in college by that time, and not terribly concerned about the loss of my dad's beloved store. I think he was lost without it. And because I was still in college when he died, I was never able to ask him questions about his and mother's life. Oh, what stories he could have told me, had things been different!