

Cousin Lena

Helena (Womboldt) Duris

by Mary E. Womboldt

Cousin Lena's letter arrived today [Spring 1967]. It's an invitation to go with her to the Springfield Flower Show. When I enrolled in Westfield State College in 1963 [First Co-Educational Normal School in the USA] Dad told me that we had a relative in Western Massachusetts. Little did I realize the impact this woman would have on my life. Lena is responsible for the interest I've developed in our family history and provided the basis of my knowledge of antiques. She also urged me to write down family stories.

On the appointed day an elegantly groomed lady drove up in her late model luxury car and introduced me to a refined and cultured style of life. We spent the whole morning touring the exhibits on display at the Flower Show and then went to a fine Springfield hotel for lunch. Before returning me to my dormitory, Scanlon Hall, we visited her home. Lena and Joe's New England farm house sat back from Route 57 at the top of a hill in West Granville, MA. Built in the 1800's it had old time comfort and charm. Only the plumbing, heating, electric systems and kitchen had been updated. Lena and her husband, Joseph [Joe] Duris loved antiques. The house, all its furnishings and attached outbuildings were authentic. Only the large barn like garage was of recent construction.

After "freshening up" Lena served tea in her front parlor [the drawing room] on a drum table. She invited me to sit...but where.. The dainty Queen Ann chairs looked too fragile to be used; the brocade covered wingback chairs too beautiful, and the Empire style sofa across the room too far away. The chair that went with the fantastic desk with the glass enclosed shelves over it was out of the question. It had once belonged to a ship's captain. Lena assured me that the chairs were quite sturdy and would easily support a large man. She believed that antiques should be used and lived with not just set out to be admired and collect dust. That night I slept in the guest room; in a four poster pineapple bed with a canopied tester and curtains, entered with the use of "bed stairs". On subsequent visits I had the use of one of the upstairs bedrooms. The entire upstairs was furnished with vintage Hitchcock from Riverton [formerly Hitchcockville]. During my years at Westfield State I often bicycled out to visit with Lena and Joe. Afterward Joe would frequently put my bike in the back of his pick up truck and drive me back to my dormitory.

Lena had moved to Western Massachusetts [which borders northern Conn.] when she got a job teaching school in Torrington, Conn. As a graduate of Framingham State Normal School [a two year course at that time] she was equipped with a teaching certificate which certified her competent to instruct pupils from kindergarten to eighth grade. It was while teaching in Torrington that she met Joseph Duris, a local farmer. They married and had many happy years together despite the disappointment of not having children. Joe loved to show Lena the hill town and back roads of western

Massachusetts and the nearby areas of the bordering states of Connecticut, New York, and Vermont. On weekends they would go for day trips stopping to explore antique shops, barn sales and house auctions.

When Lena retired from the Conn. school system she became more involved with the Granville Historical Society. She wrote many articles for their publication and for others. She and Joe traveled the country especially making trips to Granville Ohio. [Sister to Granville MA and settled by residents of Granville MA] She kept up several correspondences and was especially interested in the Womboldt family history. She and her sister Claudia even made a trip to Halifax and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.

In 1971, I purchased my first car and made my very first long trip, out to visit Lena and Joe. It was during the early spring and in Western MA snow was still carpeting the ground. From my time in Westfield, I remembered that good quality, fresh fruit, other than apples, was hard to come by west of Springfield. As a hostess gift I brought Lena a large fruit basket from Bacon Farms[Tillie's] in Natick. While there Bob and Fran Chickarilli, Tillie's sons, were unloading a truck of 50 lbs. sacks of bird seed and thistle seed. I had them carry a sack of each to my car to take with me. I was sure I'd seen bird feeders at Lena's.

I have always traveled light. Lena could not believe that I was spending nearly a week and had everything packed in one small suit case. She sent Joe out to my car to "bring in the rest of her bags". Imagine our surprise to hear Joe's whoops of excitement. He had gone to the trunk of the car as directed and discovered the huge bags of feed. To top it off the following day was his birthday. What timing.

I hadn't been aware of how much Joe loved birds. Both he and Lena enjoyed watching them. Feeders were set up just outside the morning room window and the back porch. Another feeder in the back yard. During warmer weather they spent many happy hours talking and viewing the birds from chairs set in the shade of the farmers porch outside the kitchen windows and I was privileged to join them.

Joe had been a farmer most of his life except for a stint in the military during WWI when he served in Europe. Lena grew up in Newton, MA. She always said that her father was my grandfather. During my years at college and for some time thereafter I visited and we both wrote often. Then somehow we both got involved in other things and had little contact during the mid 1980's. I was in law school when I learned Lena was hospitalized with a cancerous growth which destroyed her hip joint and led to her admission to a nursing home in Westfield. Lena died in 1992. She was a very special lady and I regret that we lived so far apart that we could not visit more often.