

Banner Elk:

THE PUDDINGSTONE PRESS 2002

DELIA SMITH ROMINGER

Beautiful, Loving, Capable

When Delia Smith Rominger was born in the Dutch Creek community near Valle Crucis, times were hard. Coming into the world at the end of World War I in 1918, little Delia arrived just at the time of the terrible 1918 Flu Epidemic and suffered through a severe measles epidemic as well.

“My mother told me she was afraid she was going to lose me. I did get both the flu and measles – at different times. Somewhere in there I had smallpox too and when I was in elementary school the Depression came.

But this little girl was meant to survive. As the baby of the Sion Smith family, Delia grew up in a large old house in Matney. She had three older sisters and one older brother, and there was also a child who was stillborn. Sion Smith worked only a small farm but managed to make a living supplementing his income. “He worked here and there where he could find a job. It was hard for anyone to make a living back then,” Delia says.

“My childhood was all during real hard years, but you know we didn’t realize it was so hard because everyone was in the same boat. But looking back on it I can see how really hard it was. Dad worked some at a lumber company over at Shull’s Mill, and I can barely remember that they were paving Highway 194 from Matney on down to Valle Crucis then. My dad worked on that too, and of course it was all done by hand and with horses – they didn’t have machines to build roads then.” She even remembers seeing men beating huge rocks with a mallet to make gravel since there were no crushers then.

Like many other children of that era, the Smith children didn’t have many toys but played simple games for fun. “We’d just make up our games because we had no TVs, radios and all that stuff. We went out into the woods and made playhouses – I think we had more fun back then than children do these days.”

Delia did have to work hard as a child. She still has the old washboard used for doing the family’s laundry. “Since I was youngest I didn’t have to work quite as hard as the others. Lucy says I was the ‘pet.’”

On the Smith farm Delia had to help plant corn and beans but says she and Sister Lucy kind of found a way to get out of it. “Mama and Papa would take a row and they’d usually give us a row to work together. We canned everything and for a while there was a store we went to, but it closed down. Then we had to go to Mast store because it was the closest.

“I can remember going to that store and trading eggs for sugar, and sometimes not having any money and grabbing up an old hen to trade. Most people who had farms had just about everything they needed. People raised pigs and made their own lard, had meat and made sausage, raised cattle, had vegetable gardens and just lived on what they raised.”

Delia’s school years began in a little two-room schoolhouse in Matney. With one teacher for each room and the grades divided up 1-3 and 4-7, all the different classes had to be very organized and timed for all students to work to their full potential. “For the different periods of classes they’d call the students up to where the teacher was,” she remembers. “School back then was only six months. It started in July and ran through Christmas, that’s all. The weather would get bad and everyone had to walk to school, and also the children had to help with the farms and crops.”

A favorite childhood memory Delia loves to share concerns the one and only time she went trick-or-treating for Halloween. “I guess I was in my early teens. My mother made a horse’s head with a sheet and all and put it on a stick. My best friend Olive and I decided to go trick-or-treating and our mothers went along too. As we stopped at different houses, more and more children joined in and their mothers too. We went up toward Cool Spring Church and at about the last house the mothers all decided to stay there and visit. They said, ‘Now don’t go to the ____ house.’ I don’t want to name any names, but the man’s wife was not all there mentally.

“Well, naturally that’s exactly where we headed. My cousin Dexter was the oldest and the biggest so he decided to carry the horse’s head. He ran up to the house and stuck the horse’s head up at the window and we heard this woman just screaming. We started running and got to a little branch. Just as we started leaping across we heard the man firing his shotgun. “We got a safe place and sat down and counted noses. Somebody said, “Oh my Lord, Dexter’s shot,” but we were alright. We did not tell our mothers about it, and my mother loved to tell that story every Halloween after that.”

When a neighbor had a heavy crop of corn, beans, or apples come in, Delia’s family would go to their barn for corn shucking’s, bean stringings, or apple peelings. “After we got through it was time for playing games, and we did have a lot of fun. They’d kind of make a game of it. When you’d come across an ear of

corn that was red, you got to do something special like kiss the prettiest girl. The neighbor would set a certain night and everybody around would just go and help. There just wasn't any other entertainment then. I was about twelve or fourteen before I ever went to a movie. There just wasn't any way to go anywhere."

Courtship, Delia relates, was mainly through the church—"anywhere they had revivals. I walked from Matney to Mt. Calvary Baptist Church here in Banner Elk. After church, the girls would start out walking, and here would come the boys behind us and then we'd pair off. I can also remember parties where we would play spin the bottle and post office and get a kiss."

The old-time pie suppers were and still today remain a favorite memory for Delia. They were held at the school. "We would take pies and fix them up in these fancy baskets and then boys would bid on them. The boys would try to find out if a certain boy and girl were going pretty much steady, then they'd gang up and try to find out which pie that girl had brought. When the bidding began, they'd run it up on that boy and make him pay a big price for his girl's pie." Another event that everyone looked forward to were the contests for the prettiest girl, which Delia hesitantly admits she won more than once.

The first year after Delia's graduation from elementary school she was in the eighth grade and a bus run was created to go over to Matney and pick up students and bring them to school in Banner Elk. Otherwise the students that continued to high school had to go and board somewhere, she recalls. After graduation from Cranberry High School, Delia attended and graduated from the Johnson City Business College.

Delia's husband-to-be, Grady Rominger, was one of nine brothers and sisters who lived in the little community of Rominger next to Matney. "All those brothers and their friends found out that there were some girls around Matney, so we'd all get together, gang up and just hang around together. We'd tell tales and have fun. Sometimes we'd just hang around together on the church steps, or by the side of the road-you know, just have fun.

"About the time I was in business college, Grady and his brother Johnny left for service. It must have been around 1936. After he got out we somehow got together, started dating, and got married. He was in the reserves so when war was declared in 1941 they had called him back in the February before Pearl Harbor."

Around that time, during the devastating 1940 Flood that hit the region, Delia was living up on a ridge and says she stood and watched the whole bottomland flooded like a river and trees floating down it. "Across from our house we could see mudslides and I was scared to death that it was going to hit my great aunt and uncle's house."

When Grady and Delia were first married they lived in Rominger, then in Vilas, but since Grady was in the service Delia wanted to be over in Banner Elk and nearer her family and her sister Lucy. For about six months during that time Delia lived in a house across Highway 194 from her present home. When the pretty little white house came up for sale, Grady's father helped her buy it. "Grady was in England at that time and I couldn't wait for an answer about buying it, so his dad just helped me – that was in 1944, I believe."

Delia says her "Papa" would stay with her three children and she would walk to the store. "I'd take an old shopping bag with a handle and buy what I needed for the week and walk back home, because there were just no cars running. I'd go to Cook's [the Village Grocery] to shop."

When Grady was stationed at Fort Bragg and there was an Air Force base in Charlotte, he was able to schedule leaves to Banner Elk to visit his family. "He came home often enough to keep me pregnant," Delia laughed.

Of the nine brothers in Grady's family, during World War II seven of the boys were in service at the same time – six overseas. One hobby that Delia loves and has a great talent for is organizing her photos and important news clippings in attractive albums. In one of these she proudly shows an old program from a community ceremony to honor Grady's mother, Mrs. Manuel (Annie) Rominger. The January 23, 1942 program was held at Banner Elk Elementary School. Leo Pritchett, Banner Elk's mayor at the time, awarded the emblem of honor pin to Mrs. Rominger. "It was so terrible for her having six boys over there in that war. She was a nervous wreck," recalls Delia.

"When Grady got out he tried farming a little and he worked in the dairy over at The Home [Grandfather Home for Children]. I guess he worked there longer than anywhere. Then when all this construction started around here he got into that. At that time they were just taking about developing Beech Mountain. He helped build the gym down at Cranberry. But then they started developing Hound Ears, so he did a good bit of work there."

Delia only used her business degree to work as a secretary a little here and there as she was so busy raising her children. "After Grady came home, and after Dana my youngest child was born, I started working at the hospital. I guess it was when Dana was around two and one-half I got talked into going into nurses training. Nellie Ramsey had signed up for the class and she got to thinking she'd be the oldest in the class. I think I was about 32 at that time, so we went into nurses training together. It was at Grace Hospital and was only for a year," Delia was a graduate of the class of 1952 and proudly displays her graduation picture with Dr. W.C. Tate standing alongside. "He taught one of our classes," she explains.

"From 1952 to 1979 I stuck with it, but I wasn't in nursing all that time. My supervisor, Mrs. Nelson, was so good. She saw what a hard time I was having trying to do my work here at home and over there too. When I think back on it now I don't know how I did it, working and taking care of all my children."

Mrs. Nelson offered Delia a position in the lab with Mr. Bryon Pritchett, which gave her each Sunday and one half-day a week off. "Mr. Pritchett was the only one doing x-rays and before I knew it he had me doing x-rays too.

"After I had been there for a while, Mr. Pritchett quit the hospital and took a teaching job at the college and left me holding the bag. I didn't much feel like taking charge; it was more than I could handle. Finally they did get a lab technician and I didn't have to do it all. About that time Floyd Ramsey started helping too. Before we moved into the new hospital we only had a visiting radiologist, but when we moved over there we finally got a radiologist. Floyd then went on and worked with the new doctor and got registered. I was wanting to get out of it.

"These days everything in the lab has completely changed. We had to put up our own supplies and of course everything we used had to be sterile. We had to take everything up to be autoclaved. We even had to boil the enema tubes and wash, dry, and powder the rubber gloves. Soon after we moved to the new hospital [Cannon Memorial], everything changed and started to be disposable."

Mr. Pritchett taught Delia much about x-ray technique. "I just learned on the job and then when we got a full-time radiologist I learned a lot from him too. Then in 1972 I got so tired of x-rays – that was when the skiing was going full-blast and there were so many broken bones and fractures. We had to really work hard all day, and then be on call at night to go over to the hospital and make x-rays. It was really hard trying to work and take care of my children."

Daughter Sandy Cooper comments, "All my brothers and I think our mother is just a remarkable person. How she was able to accomplish so much such as going to nursing school, finding time to study, keeping the household running smoothly, working a vegetable garden, and preserving that food for winter will always be a mystery. Still there was no shortage of love and attention in our home. She always made time for her four children and I have happy memories of those times."

"Dr. W.C. Tate was such a nice professional person and there was no foolishness about him. I can remember his office was right next to the lab and when he needed a nurse, he'd go out to his door and holler, 'Nurse, Nurse.' He called all women 'sister' and all men 'brother.' If he couldn't find a regular nurse, he'd come in the lab and get me to go with him. He was so professional he wouldn't think of going in a patient's room without a nurse.

"I walked to work in the snow. Later we got a car but I didn't drive and when I was on call and would have to go in at night. Grady would have to get up and take me. Later, after Grady died, I decided if I wanted to go anywhere, I'd better learn to drive."

When Delia left the hospital, the Banner Elk Life Care Center was opening and she decided to go work there. But that only lasted seven months and she has not worked outside the home since.

In 1955, when Delia was only 48 years old, Grady died. While she has had many suitors and prospective husbands since then, she says she has chosen to remain single. "Every time I thought about that I'd say to myself, 'Is that the face I want to see every morning for the rest of my life?'"

Delia is such a pretty woman and looks much younger than 83. Her hair is still its original dark color with hardly any gray. Chronicled in one scrapbook are a number of nice and handsome men who have vied for her hand, some of whom have looked her up from the old days, and even as far back as her famous pie suppers. But – she was not interested.

She fondly remembers one suitor who always "put her up" for the prettiest girl at the pie suppers. "He saw that I got it too. The last pie supper I went to, I had gone with that man who I told you died of a heart attack [one of the men in her scrapbook]. Anyway, he and this other feller got together and put me up. It embarrassed me to death. The other one I was running against, Barbara, I think. . . Well, it works like this. You have to pay so much, maybe a dime or so, to bid. All the other boys would run it up so high that the boyfriend would have to pay a lot to get his girl's pie. The girl who won the contest won a cake."

Always a lover of the mountains where she has lived all her life, Delia doesn't like all the change that has come to the area. "It was so good in the old days because you knew everyone, and now there's beginning to be more crime. It was just quieter and more peaceful then."

These days Delia busies herself with her family. She likes to read and says she is addicted to crossword puzzles. There are certain television programs she really enjoys but does not like the "soaps". She does like movies.

Delia's four children, Sandra, Randall, Sherrill, and Dana all live fairly close to her with the exception of Randy, who lives in Ohio. The Romingers owned property around and across the highway from their house and have divided the land between their four children. She says she is so proud of them all. "They've turned out so that I'm very proud of them. Sandra, who has a lovely voice, often sings solos at her church, Arbor Dale Presbyterian. "I was so surprised when I heard she was singing solos, she was always so shy." Delia has eight grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

An excellent quilt maker, she readily gives her handmade artistry to others. "I used to sew a lot and made a good portion of my children's clothes when they were small."

She is a member of Mt. Calvary Baptist Church and attends regularly.

While Delia's son Randy was overseas in Germany, she went over to visit. "I made a lot of pictures. I enjoyed visiting Paris so much." She has also traveled to the western United States but says she loves living here in the North Carolina Mountains.

At 83, Delia Rominger looks 63 – she is amazing. That pretty young girl who was the envy of all others at the long ago Matney pie suppers could easily still win a beauty contest. And that beauty is not just on the outside; Delia is a wonderful loving woman admired by many and truly loved by all her family and friends.