

Memories of Reuben and Aurelia Rockwell in the 1870s

By

Miss Jane E. W. Smith

Jane Smith had been sent to live with the Rev. Henry A. Russell while he was pastor of a church in Essex, Connecticut. Mrs. Russell had an aunt, Mrs. Samuel E. Mills, who lived at what today is 667 Colebrook Road, diagonally across the road from the Rock School, and it was with her that the new minister of the Colebrook Congregational Church and his family came to live in 1868.

In 1930, she was asked to write her memories of her youth in Colebrook, and the following, under the chapter heading of "My Favorite People", begins with Mrs. & Mrs. Reuben Rockwell.

"Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Rockwell stand out prominently in my memory, as they were often at our house. Mrs. Rockwell, whose maiden name was Aurelia Eno, was a niece of Aunt Mills. I was also often at their house, and one summer when attending schools at the Center under the tuition of Miss Ellen Bacon, a much loved teacher, I made my home at their house through the week. I assisted Mrs. Rockwell, who was a most exquisite housekeeper, in the work of the household, and whatever of success I have ever attained in that line I owe largely to her instructions. To the air of homely comfort always in evidence in her rooms, was often added the artistic touch that was always impressive to me as a child. To cite one example; every autumn she gathered the most beautiful of the Maple leaves, pressed, and then waxed them, and arranged them over the folding doors between the parlor and the sitting room. I think I have never picked up a lovely autumn leaf since then without thinking of Mrs. Rockwell."

"Her personal appearance had this same exquisiteness; always dressed with perfect taste in simple garments, rather frail in health, but always with a smile of appreciation and interest, she seems to me now as I look back, like a piece of fine fragile china".

"As a cook, she vied in my opinion with Mrs. John S. Wheeler, and she made the most perfect rhubarb pie I ever tasted. I was often tempted to 'sneak' a piece between meals from the great home made ice box in the back room of her house."

"Mr. Rockwell was easily the most prominent man in the town, being nearly all his life either town clerk, postmaster or town treasurer. At one time he held a federal office under President Grant, I think. He was a most genial man, interested in everybody, and to whom many came for advice and assistance, usually with satisfactory results. I was told by an old friend of his after his death, that among his papers were found mortgage notes on the farms and homes of many people in the town, and that his will directed that they should all be cancelled at his death. I could not vouch for the absolute truth to this, but it certainly sounds very much like him". [Her information was accurate; he did in fact leave instructions to cancel all mortgage debts held in his name. One of these debtors was Arah Phelps, who local legend says was his arch rival in Colebrook.]

He was a very devoted Republican, but when Democrats were elected to offices whose duties they did not understand, as very often happened, they almost invariably came to him for instructions, which were always cheerfully given. He cultivated his ancestral acres, and among his farmer henchmen were Bernard Barry, 'Jim' Miles and

Luther Sparks. They were all devoted to him and to his interests both agriculturally and politically.”

“Both Mr. & Mrs. Rockwell were very fond of children and as they had none of their own, they paid a great deal of attention to all the children of the town, and were much liked by them. Many were the Christmas presents we received from them, and even now I can recall some of mine, and the delight they gave me. One Christmas it was a frock pattern of Merrimack calico, the very best to be had in calicos, and I still have a piece of that dress in the ‘block’ of a bed-quilt, and it has never faded out.”

“Mr. Rockwell loved dearly to tease his wife. As I have said she was a fine cook, and like any wife liked to have her efforts appreciated by her husband, whom she adored, but out of pure mischief he would never praise anything. One day when I was having dinner with them, and the most delicious biscuits were being served, Mrs. Rockwell said, “Reuben, don’t you think these biscuits are good?” ‘Why yes, my dear, but don’t you think it would have sounded better if someone else had said it?’ A discouraged look came over her face, while he chuckled, and winked at me.”

“He had a great aversion to patchwork quilts; said he couldn’t see the sense of tearing up cloth and sewing it together again. Once in the last years of his life I got him to talk about his boyhood days. He told of one of his teachers named Nancy Barker, who once pulled a whole tuft of hair from the head of one of the boys. He said, ‘I vowed that when I got big enough, I would thrash that old woman’, but she died before that time came.’ I think she must have been one of the ‘old dame’ school teachers.”

Describing an old time ‘General Training’ he said the boys all despised the officer in command that particular day, who appeared in a fine uniform with immaculate white trousers. ‘It had rained the night before and captain happened to stand opposite a mud puddle when we marched past him. We all slapped our feet down hard into the puddle and splashed those beautiful white trousers’. After all those years, he still chuckled at the remembrance.

“Mr. Rockwell was not what orthodox people would call a religious man, but he always attended church and helped support it, and was one of the most consistent practitioners of the Golden Rule I ever knew. I heard him say once, “The Lord ain’t guilty of half the things that are laid to him’. He didn’t like so-called ‘revivals’ any more than I did and speaking of one such service said: ‘The minister asked everyone who knew they were saved to stand. Everybody stood but Caroline Corbin and me’. (This was Mrs. Peter Corbin, a most intelligent woman, who did her own thinking.)”

I was present when his sister Elizabeth passed away. The tears of the woman who had been her housekeeper and companion for years were falling over the dead body of her friend. Mr. Rockwell said: ‘Don’t feel so badly miss, it’s just as natural to die, as it is to be born’.

“When it came his turn to go, he sat by the open fire in the old home as long as he was able, then laid him down in the room that had been his sister’s, sent for his faithful Luther Sparks, who stayed by him until the end, which was not far off. It seems that he managed his dying in the same business-like manner that he had his living.”