

My Father -- George Starr Abell (1876-1947)

My father, George Starr Abell, was born in Florence, Massachusetts, on November 23, 1876, the first of two children by his mother's second marriage. He was short, about five feet five inches tall, frail, and had black hair and blue eyes. He was a very bright, nimble, and clever man with an artistic flair and a love for dramatics.

I have heard my father say he was was a paper boy at five. I don't doubt it as he was very quick with figures and arithmetic games were fun at our house. We always thought he should have been a lawyer as he was wonderful in a debate. Dad skipped a couple of grades and took a two year business course in high school which he finished at age fourteen. He needed to find work to help support his family, but his health was not good as his doctor thought he might have a tendency towards tuberculosis. The doctor advised him to get an outdoor job, so he worked for a grocer delivering groceries until later when he could have a store of his own. Thus my brother Ellis and I learned at an early age the secrets of storekeeping and how to get along with the public.

My father was very clever with his hands and could do any kind of repair job, large or small. I remember him putting a cement basement wall under our house in the evenings and my mother holding a lantern for him. We were the first house on our street to have gas and then electricity because he did the work himself. I suppose might be hard for you children to realize how many hours men and women worked just to provide food and shelter for their families in those days.

My parents led very little social life except with my mother's family, the Ellis tribe, all of whom lived nearby. I never remember having anyone for dinner until I was old enough to entertain my friends. Mother attended church. Dad loved the movies and went as often as he could. I'm sure he would grab a handful of "sucky balls" from the candy case before he left, as we kids always looked for what was left over in his pocket. I might say we had ready access to the candy case but were trained not to touch it. We could have a five cent bag of anything we chose on Saturday night.

Dad was very proud of his family and expected us to be at the top of our class in school. We didn't feel pushed because it gave us pleasure to please him. Our family life was fun because Dad always had a trick or joke to amuse us. He and Mother played games with us at the round oaken dining room table.

We never had much money to spend, but if we ever went anywhere like an amusement park, Dad treated us to everything. We might go but once a year, but that was a memorable occasion.

This might be a good time to explain about the store. It was located about three quarters of a mile from downtown Westfield. We owned a house and large lot so it was easy to build an addition for a store. It was in an ell attached to our house which had a large yard. On one side of the yard was a barn with a place for two horses and an ice house -- we cut our own ice in winter, packed it in sawdust, and had plenty for the store and for us. We kids felt it a great asset because we could make ice cream. This was done by packing a covered pan of mix

in the snow. We stirred it a couple of times and then let it freeze. It wasn't that good, but we enjoyed it. There were also some sweet cherry trees enjoyed by us and the birds. On the other side we had lawns, a brook, and a garage that housed two Stanley Steamer cars.

This was a typical grocery store of the day. In the morning my father went around to his customers and sold groceries and in the afternoon would deliver them. After people began to use telephones, they called in their orders. The store opened at six in the morning and closed at six at night.

Dad loved to tinker with the cars and would have to stay home from church to get the steam up in the boiler if we took a ride in the afternoon. This must have been in about 1910, and how dusty the roads were! The cars were called touring cars and were open to the wind, sun, and dust. The wealthy of our town wore dusters, veils, and visored hats -- Mother managed a veil and Dad wore a hat. We kids took the wind and dust in full force.

One Saturday afternoon a barrel of molasses was delivered to our back yard. On Sunday morning we awoke to a yard full of the sticky stuff. We were very surprised and had no idea how it happened. I don't remember that Dad made any fuss (Mother cried because it was an expensive loss), but he set to work with sawdust and sand to clean it up. He had a quick temper but took real emergencies in stride.

Dad's health was never good from the time he was young, but Mother kept him as well as good food can do. We always had good food even when money was very tight. Nowadays Dad would have a good doctor who would

give him something for his terrific headaches. He used to tie a bandage around his head and pull it as tight as he could. We kids were used to his ill health and never worried about it much. He did live to be seventy years old, which is a long way from twenty as the doctors predicted when he was young.

Dad always found jobs for us kids. The work around the store and in the house was without pay — just our contributions to the family. We always had a small allowance which of course didn't go far enough. So two money-making jobs always awaited us in the corner of the yard. One was cleaning bricks, two for a cent, and the other was picking good coal that came from the furnace ashes, which brought the big sum of two cents a hod. I managed to accumulate quite a few pennies before breakfast on fair mornings. Dad was a super salesman, and if he had been half as good a bill collector we would have been rich. I heard him say many times to Mother, "Bess, I couldn't let those kids go hungry just because their father spent the money for drink."

So we were not rich, but Dad made everything fun, even our back yard ball games. We five made quite a game of baseball. Mother was the best one on the team. Dad was a baseball fan right through his last summer of life. My brother played on our high school team, and if Dad could make it, he would be at the game. So I was brought up on baseball.

Another time we all loved was the July 4th holiday. We saved our pennies for firecrackers, and Dad bought the evening Roman candles, etc. He was the biggest kid of us all. There was a town parade in the

morning and ice cream in the afternoon. Ice cream was a great treat, for there wasn't a place to buy it on every corner like today. We had two ice cream parlors in town, and we patronized the one that gave the biggest dish for five cents.

When Dad lost his temper, he addressed his remarks (not swearing) to the family in general. When the collar button (or what have you) was found after a mad scramble by all of us, he would laugh and say, "Bess, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." Another thing I remember was that he was always the last to the table, the reason being that he always combed his hair and scrubbed his hands before he came.

Dad hated to send out bills and to handle money, so I learned at an early age to help Mother with that job. I often carried several hundred dollars to the bank when I was in first grade. The reason I remember this was that I was supposed to take the trolley car to school from the bank. Once when I waved to stop the car, the motorman paid no attention. I then ran all the way to school and fortunately made it on time.

My father hated to travel. He told about his honeymoon trip to New York as if he had been around the world. He must have been pretty much in love to have gone at all. Mother could go any time it was possible, but that wasn't very often. Dad had many hobbies and always found time for them even when he worked long hours. He rebuilt batteries for one. He built himself a shop of cement blocks (which he made) and in it he put a bench and equipment. Sometimes I saw his light burning past midnight. Dad also raised chickens, and during his later years,

rabbits. He even did electrical work for the neighbors and installed new furnaces.

I can hardly remember when we didn't have a car (there were only a couple in the city). They didn't all go too well, but Dad wasn't interested in going far. With his tinkering, we did get quite a bit of mileage out of them. He bought a new Chevrolet when I started driving, but for himself he sort of lost interest. I started driving in the tobacco fields not far from our house when I was fourteen. Maybe I didn't learn about traffic, but I did learn to handle a car -- a shift into second or low gear every few yards. The state roads had been improved, although they were a bit bumpy.

When I was married, Dad was so nervous I had to hold him tight going down the aisle. He had taken time to be made beautiful; I was fortunate to find time to get my hair done. I think he managed to get himself dressed, which was lucky because I helped every other member of the family including the bridegroom. His fingers were all thumbs with his tie. I helped my mother, grandmother, and then my sister Mildred, the maid of honor. We found that after she was dressed one could see through her skirt. So with a "hankie" of Dad's, I repaired the damage by pinning it onto her slip to make a sort of shield.

My father lived and worked for his family; they were most important in his life. Once, after my husband and I were married, he said, "I wish our family could come home and live here with us." We did spend many college vacations with them and always Christmas.

My father never had a vacation except Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Independence Day. He surely would be surprised to hear of long weekends and trips to the Carribean. He wouldn't have known how to use all the leisure time of today. He was always a happy man because his family had so much more than he did growing up.