

Lillian Cole Depew (1884-1918)



Lillian Cole Depew, my grandmother, was born **January 9, 1884** in Montague, NJ. It was a very different time without the things we take for granted like cars, electricity and even indoor bathrooms. She grew up on a farm in the northern tip of New Jersey very close to New York and Pennsylvania and near the Delaware River. There were trains to the big cities, but horse and buggies were the main method of travel in the country.

Lilly's parents were **George and Emma Cole**. George was said to be fat and jolly, but not too smart and Emma was very heavy. They may not have even owned their own farm renting it from

relatives.

The family was descended from a long line of primarily Dutch farmers who settled this part of the country before the Revolutionary War. The first Cole to come to American was **Barent Jacobsen Kool**, who probably arrived in New Amsterdam with Peter Minuet about 1625. New Amsterdam later became New York City and the spelling of their last name changed a number of times. In Holland Kool meant cabbage.

In Lilly's time people had large families and there were twelve children in her family. Families were large because some children died young, many hands were needed to run a farm and birth control was pretty much unknown. Lilly was the seventh of twelve children.

Her early life would have included farm chores and some school. Her social life was probably centered around her church, which was Methodist Episcopal, and perhaps the Grange, an organization for farmers. At that time many people lived their whole lives without traveling far from where they were born and never saw a big city.



Lilly at about 11.

But Lilly caught a lucky break. Most of the people in the area farmed and the families were interrelated. It wasn't unusual for a family with so many children to 'loan' one to another family who needed help. This is what happened to Lilly and it may well have been at 11-13 years old. She lived with the **Honorable Jacob Swartout** and his wife **Lillie Decker Swartout** (our Lilly's namesake?) in nearby Sussex. Jacob was much wealthier than Lilly's father, being an extensive farmer, merchant and hotel proprietor in Port Jervis, and could introduce her to more of the world. Lilly would have helped as a housekeeper and with the Swartout's only daughter Alice. The 1900 census lists Lilly in the Swartout household at age 15 as a servant. Alice was three, but died in 1914.

Lilly must have been smart as her Aunt Lilly was very fond of her, probably helping with her education and encouraging her to become a teacher.

Country schools were very small then and it was not necessary to go to college to teach. Lilly took teaching classes in Newton, the nearest big town and the center of county government. In Newton were the courts, government, jail, factories and shops. It would seem like a big city to a country girl in 1900. An unmarried young woman wouldn't have lived alone so it is likely that she stayed with relatives, probably arranged by her Lilly.

Lilly's first teaching job was in 1904 when she was just 20 at her old school in Montague - the Brick House School - where she worked with an experienced teacher.



She next taught in Longbridge, a one-room school house outside Branchville. Most schools were one or two rooms in those days and she would probably have taught eight grades with no help and had to take care of the building too. Her pay was about \$30 per month. Heat might have been a wood stove and there would have been an outhouse.



Longbridge school.

The 1910 census finds Lilly living with her parents again in Montague. She is listed as a public school teacher and may have been teaching at Montague again as the school is very close to her parents' home. Five of her siblings were living at home too, including a younger sister Grace who was also a public school teacher.

On March 12, 1912, when she was 27, she married an up and coming Newton grocer named Claude Depew.

She probably knew her future husband as a girl because he grew up on a nearby farm in Layton under very similar circumstances. Claude left home at 14 to go to the city and seek his fortune and returned to Newton as the manager of a grocery store.

They may have found each other in Newton through friends or relatives. She was taller than her husband and about a year younger.

She was fairly old to be just getting married and they wasted no time having children. In fact my mother, Ilsa Irene, was born on October 10 the same year they were married. Hmmm! Two sons followed: Claude Milton in 1914 and Howard Cole in 1916.



Lillian & Claude courting.

Lilly now settled into a promising life in a nice town, with a young family and a husband with a good business. The future looked good, but it wasn't to be. When she was young she probably had rheumatic fever, a not uncommon childhood disease of the time, which left her with a weakened heart. After the stress of bearing children and at around age 30 she began to have problems with her heart and was being treated by a specialist in New York City. They didn't have the knowledge, medicines or tools to treat hearts that they have today. In February 1918 Lilly traveled alone by train to New York City for treatment by her doctor. While there she had a heart attack and died at the very young age of 33. She may well have been pregnant with another boy at the time too. She left her husband Claude with three young children to raise.



Lilly was quite an accomplished lady for her time. She was probably the first woman in her family line to leave farm life while unmarried, the first woman in her family to pursue a professional career, and the first to become a teacher.

Although we can't know for sure credit has to go to her mentor, Lillie Decker Swartwout, who stayed close to the Depue family after Lilly died. The Decker's were a prominent family in the Sussex area. Her father was the owner of the famous trotting mare 'Goldsmith Maid.'

Lilley outlived her husband by 30 years passing in 1945.

I recall visiting her with Mom as a child. I would have liked to know both pioneer women better.

Lillian is buried in Newton Cemetery with Claude.

Sources

- Find A Grave: www.findagrave.com/memorial/14635459/lillian_s-depew,
www.findagrave.com/memorial/11224204/lillie_o-swartwout
- Lillian's death certificate.
- "Images of America" Montague