



DONNA L. EMERSON, *House on a Hill*, photograph, 1973/4

Donna L. Emerson

HOUSE ON A HILL

Our family farmhouse looked like a hat on a hill. She stood surrounded by wheat and woods, in the Southern Tier of New York on the highest hill in Bath. Higher than the notorious Martha's Crotch, as Grandpa affectionately called the area around Mossy Bank. The house looked over the woods where Grandpa took the horses and wagon to make maple syrup some winters, when Mom was little. The house stood across from the potato patch, which saw the family through the Depression. Victorian, she sat like Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat, sometimes even looked askew, against the elements, on that hill.

Lincoln was Grandma and Grandpa's president. He was the rugged individual their Teddy Roosevelt talked about. The "only Roosevelt," who had as bodyguards Grandma's six-foot-five-inch-tall uncles. Lincoln and Roosevelt seemed to share dinner with us. Between prayers and talks about cold cash and owning your own land, we learned to "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps."

Six mature maples lined the road, edged the front lawn. A young cherry tree and a busy lilac bush surrounded the downhill side of the house. We could smell them where we sat on canvas folding chairs to read, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." We read, "O Captain! My Captain," as well, but not, "Song of Myself." That would be conceited, we were told then.

The farmhouse was Republican, crowning the two-hundred-twenty-five acres secured in land grants when this area was settled by the family. She looked stronger out there alone at the hill's crest than the tiny shacks and lean-tos which were scattered here and there on the roads below her. She was the big, white, wooden set of boxes which fit together well, pleased the eyes with her geometry, her long rectangular windows trimmed in black. Like black satin on a top hat. She looked like a well-dressed Republican, among scrappy Democrats. Even patrician, in a certain light.

She wasn't this beautiful at the beginning. An early photograph of the farmhouse, taken about 1914, showed her when she was presented as a wedding gift to my grandparents. The house was not insulated or painted, more than rough around the edges. The inside was also unfinished, with no plumbing, a wood stove, and ten rooms of varying sizes, just bare walls.

Twenty years ago I found and printed some old negatives Grandma had kept in boxes. These showed many early family gatherings, outside on the lawn. Grandma looked so young in her long skirts with ironed aprons or long pinafores, standing on the downhill corner of the house. Usually with her family, her first baby, Harry, in 1916. She smiled broadly, proudly, with the openness of one newly married. Her strawberry blond hair blew in the wind or was pinned neatly in a Gibson Girl bun on top of her head. She married late, at twenty-eight, but looked nineteen in these early pictures. I could feel in her face how new it seemed for her to be a farmer's wife, in the country, having a baby at home, and straddling the many chores on this windy hill. It showed in the photographs where she forgot to pose. She looked a bit undone, as if some of her wide-spread hairpins had fallen from the crown of her head. Yet the house, staunch behind her, seemed to hold her up, testified that she was doing just fine. Grandpa must have taken these likenesses, because he is in none of them. He snapped Grandma in soft, probably Sunday afternoon light, because he had won "the prettiest girl in Bath."

Over the years of my childhood, the farmhouse tipped her hat to all who visited: twelve cousins, our entire families, our dogs, the neighbors, sweaty Bernard Fulmer down the hill, the ministers of the in-town Methodist church and the country Bucks Settlement church the next hill over, even the Seventh Day Adventists who Grandpa let use the pond for their baptisms. They wore starched white shirts and long black dresses. We peeked through cattails when they walked into the water and were laid back in the name of Jesus and John the Baptist.

Later, friends came with us to our summers on the farm. They had to pass the "Farm Test," which meant no bathtub or shower, no hot water, one toilet which we flushed twice a day, and sleeping wherever there was a bed. They had to listen to Grandpa's long dinner blessings and stay up late beside the fire, telling stories around the circle.

Ten years later, when the farmhouse burned down, we cried and wrote poems. Called each other. Grandma didn't cry. She said, "The fire didn't get the trees."

Over time, the farm passed from our grandparents to our parents and then to us.

Thirty years after the farmhouse burned, I built a new house on the farm, with my father's inheritance. Not at the top of the hill, but two acres away, in the sugar maples. The big house's foundation was still up on top. Surrounded by the same six maple trees, the lilac, now half an acre wide, and the cherry tree. How did the cherry escape the fire, so close to the back bedroom? Ash, maple, and locust saplings thrust straight up from the earth inside the farmhouse's stony borders.

It is still our house on the hill. We walk there every year and sit on her stones, dangle our feet into her rooms. And we tell this story to our children.

It wasn't the boards and bricks and paint that made us smile; it was her insides, and how we filled her up, like a top-hat's lining. ☞