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BUTTERMILK COULEE

I would like to tell you of a beautiful valley where I lived when I was a little girl about eight years old. It was a long time ago, about 1885, but the scenes are very bright and plain to me now, after seventy-eight years of living and watching the changes in this historic valley, nick-named "Buttermilk Coulee". This valley or coulee is in the town of Eau Galle, in Dunn County, Wisconsin.

When I was about eight years of age my father moved his family from the boarding house in the village of Eau Galle to our farm in this Missouri Valley as it is now called, or as people living there would like to call it. It seems "Buttermilk Coulee" still sticks and always will. There is always a reason for everything and very few people living know just why it is called "Buttermilk Coulee". That is why I am writing this.

After the sawmills were closed in Eau Galle and farms were opened up, a creamery was built in the village just between the bridge and the flour mill. It was the only creamery known at that time in Dunn County. It was a large white building and men were hired to haul the cream. They had light-weight wagons and about six red barrels lined with tin and heavy covers to keep the cream from splashing out.

Of course, the butter was easily disposed of, but it was a problem to know what to do with this rich buttermilk with chunks of butter like bullets or shot floating in it. For a while it was just poured into the river, but now and then a farmer would come for it. As time passed, more farmers realized its value and many farmers came. This was hard to handle--first come, first served-- and that did not bring satisfaction either. The butter makers decided to auction off the buttermilk and this was done for many years.

As the farmers in this valley seemed to have the most use for the buttermilk, they bid higher and higher and cream haulers were hired to haul it to the highest bidders who lived in this then unnamed valley. People there came out to bid on the buttermilk just like they came out to elections and there was great rivalry among the farmers in Spring Coulee and Missouri Valley, as a few people called it.

As was very natural, the low bidders became sullen and dubbed our valley "Buttermilk Coulee", a name that has stayed by it for over 75 years. Now very few people know what part of the valley came to be called by that name.

The valley itself was beautiful. A large Tamarack swamp was on the south side of the road and in this swamp pitcher plants and pink Lady Slippers grew. Many times we waded through the swamp to pick clusters of Lady Slippers growing so stately at the foot of the Tamarack trees with no one but the children to admire their beauty. Often I, just a little girl, sat on a bog and gazed at the flowers and wondered how they could grow there in that shaded spot.

Then the Pitcher plants intrigued me. My grandfather had come from Germany before the Civil War, and he knew all these plants and taught me to know them. To know, too, the beautiful trees and the swamp they grew in. In 1957 a pitcher plant was brought to me by a friend from a swamp in northern Wisconsin and it brought back memories of Buttermilk Coulee. Not many families lived there at that time.

Edwin Drake, a bookkeeper for the Carson Rand Co. in Eau Galle, and James Graves of Eau Galle, had farms there but rented them out. My father, Willard Smith, had land that he homesteaded after the Civil War. Fred

Rodewald, an old German who had come from Germany to Dodge County, Wis. and then to Dunn Co. also lived there. Mr. and Mrs. John Seitz, Sr. who had come from Switzerland, owned the farm with the big swamp. Jack Crain, a Civil war veteran, also lived there and that took in just about all the people except Mr. and Mrs. Marcellus Fitch, who had come from Kentucky. The children of the Fitches lived mostly in Arkansaw, Pepin Co., where some of the relatives still live. Mrs. Fitch always wore a black lace bonnet and she smoked a clay pipe. Mr. Fitch had a long white beard and they could sing all the songs of the Southland, melodies of the colored folk. Rumor said that Mrs. Fitch was part colored. Be this as it may, they were very kind and peaceable old people. They got our baking board three times a day to bake soda biscuits for their meals.

Just up the coulee a little ways my uncle lived in a log house built long before the Civil War and it stood until about 1952. I have a picture of that log house as well as our own that was built in 1870. My Aunt Angeline also lived near in a log house. Her husband was John Hoyt, who died in Andersonville Prison during the Civil War. She was left with two little deaf girls who later went to Delavan, Wis. where there was a school for the deaf. She also had two little boys and lived alone with her children all during the war.

As for the Seitz family, Mr. Seitz was an old aristocrat. He was very dressy and wore a black cut-away suit with tails almost to his knees. His shirt had a white stiff bosom and he had either rhinestones or glass studs down the front. Any way something we children admired. His cuffs were as stiff as a board and his coat sleeves were too short. The cuffs stuck out full length and he really had gold cuff links. He wore a long white mustache that was trimmed across the front so his teeth showed, but the ends of his mustache came almost to his stiff, white collar that had two points standing out at each side. He was very short and heavyset and very well educated for that time. Mrs. Seitz always wore waists and skirts with a blue denim apron and was a very hard worker. Her hands were rough from toil and she could and did do all kinds of work.

They didn't get along too well and often my father was called over there to settle their differences. They lived just across the swamp from us. They had a wonderful spring coming out of the side of the hill by their house. It was stoned up and fixed very nicely with a deep place to dip water. In the fall the speckled trout would come up to spawn. The head of the spring would be just black with the backs of large trout and we would chase these trout down through her milk house that stood about twelve or fourteen feet below the head of the spring. Mrs. Seitz would have a pie tin and as they came from under the logs of the milk house, she would push the pie tin down and hold the trout in the sand. She would then quickly stick her thumb through their gills and thump their heads on a milk crock to kill them, then she would throw them into a pan we had brought and catch another and another until we would have plenty for our dinner or supper. No game laws then.

My mother was very kind to Mrs. Seitz, often giving her wool carded so she could spin yarn for socks or mittens. We had a large flock of sheep and mother sent the fleece with my grandmother to the carding mill at Martell, in Pierce County, so she could help out Mrs. Seitz with the wool already for the spinning wheel.

The Jack Crain's family I did not know so well. He was a grand old Civil War veteran and his family was all older than I. His daughter Mrs. George Lee, died in Elmwood, in 1952. She was past ninety at the time of her death.

Farther up in the coulee Fred Rodewald lived. They too had a beautiful spring filled with trout. The spring came out of the side of the hill and

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"Mr. Rody" as we called him had a bed of ginseng and Lady Slippers growing all around the head of the spring. Ginseng with one white root is called a "one-pronger". You can tell it by the prongs of the plant. Some of the plants were "seven and eight prongers". Anyway that is how this old German gentleman talked. He was our school clerk and he always came to our school at least once a month, all dressed up in his blue flannel trousers. They buttoned right down the front, through the crotch and up the back with big white buttons. Big white buttons were sewed on the band for his suspenders to be buttoned on.

His shirt was usually a plaid, blue and white. Mrs. Rodewald dressed like Mrs. Seitz, a waist and long skirt. We didn't know her so well for she rarely went to the places we did. Mr. Seitz and Mr. Rody each had their ears pierced and wore heavy gold earrings like rings. They always wore them as far as I can remember and my grandfather, who came from Germany, wore them too, as did many of the men of that day.

I could write more of this Rodewald farm but it would involve names of people living today. After Mr. Rodewald gave up the farm, it was purchased by a very prominent man who farmed or rented it out for a long time. As I remember this man bought lots of buttermilk. He was a banker and hotel man. His wife taught our school for many years and today their son is one of Wisconsin's most active politicians. His mother boarded in our home for three years.

Our schoolhouse was an old log building built in about 1848. The desks were built of boards. The recitation seats were benches built of rough lumber. The stove was a long iron heater that could hold several sticks of cordwood. It had a hearth sticking out in front where we often put our feet to warm. Two of the stove legs had been broken and the stove was propped up with stones. The top of the stove was flat and had two griddles that could be lifted up to poke the fire. Most of the time a large iron teakettle was singing on the stove. I don't know why and I don't think anyone else knew. It was just there, that was all.

A family by the name of Sidons lived above the Rodewalds and farther up the Crains lived, but none of the buttermilk went that far up the valley. Yet the people of today call that part "Buttermilk Coulee". That shows how little the people of today know about where and why it is so called.

A very lovely trout stream flowed the whole length of the valley, and was called by the people living there, "The Big Missouri". A small trout stream flowed through the Maple Spring valley and was called "Little Missouri".

Now after all these years I feel the people living now should know WHY Missouri Valley was nicknamed "Buttermilk Coulee".

Cora Smith Klatt

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Note:

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