

## Jeannie Geremia Interview Spring 2016

We met Jeannie Geremia when her Neshanic Garden Club organized a show dedicated to the theme of the Sourlands. She had just succeeded, with the help of State Senator Kip Bateman, getting the legislature to approve our very first official state butterfly, the Black Swallowtail. She had for some time admired the resilience of this beautiful creature and the fact that it is found in every one of New Jersey's twenty-one counties.

In the course of setting up our exhibit we quickly discovered that Jeannie has deep roots in the Sourlands going back to the 1700's; two of her distant Sourland ancestors fought for George Washington in the American Revolution.

In 1806 Jeannie's great-great- great-great grandmother Gertrude Chamberlain married Christopher Danberry, who had been born in a house on what is now Rileyville Road. One of their numerous great grandchildren was Jeannie's great-grandfather Edward Nathan Danberry. Over the years from 1892 through 1915 the family acquired, parcel by parcel, approximately 300 acres atop the Sourlands ("nearly all of the Neshanic Mountain") in the area of Long Hill Road, much of which is now owned by the 3M/ Gibraltar Quarry. When Edward Danberry bought the land it was heavily wooded, and for many years he logged the forest and operated a lumber mill. Strips of outer bark were used as "tugboat fender." It took two teams of horses each day to drag the downed trees out of the woods, and when the fenders were fashioned would be transported to the Neshanic Station train and on to their final destination. At a certain point most of the forest was cleared and Ed, as so many Sourland farmers did, converted his land to peach orchards. Edward's father had died when Edward was a toddler of three, so early on he learned the farming skills he needed to help his widowed mother keep the family farm going. As a young married man Edward and his wife, Margaret Ellen Grey Danberry, gradually converted the cleared forest acreage into peach farming. One of Margaret's tasks was to sort the peaches into ones that could be sold locally- the soft ones could be eaten by the children- and ones which could be shipped on the train

to New York, New Brunswick, or Philadelphia. Edward also loaded “baskets and baskets” onto a wagon and start out at midnight for the market in Trenton. Edward and Margaret had nine children: Harry, Cora, Theodore who died in infancy, Martin, Pete, Gertie, Evvie, Abner, and Raymond.

Some of the wonderful stories Jeannie tells she learned from recorded interviews with her Great Aunt Gertrude Danberry Layton (1903-2004), and her Grandmother, Eva (Evvie) Danberry Lake (1905-1999) who grew up on the family’s Sourland Mountain farm. Gertie and Evvie recalled a peddler named Michael who would periodically come to Skillman on the train from Philadelphia and, carrying a great big bundle on his back, hike all over the Sourlands selling his wares: underwear, tablecloths, lace, gingham, and other fabric items. Gertie’s mother would give him a good meal and allow him to sleep overnight. Because he was Jewish he would inquire whether the food had any pork lard in it. Gertie’s mother, whose food repertoire was somewhat limited, would fudge her reply so that Michael could enjoy a meal in good conscience. One time Michael asked for a glass of cider and little brother Raymond was sent out to the barn to fetch it. Unfortunately young Raymond did not know how to draw it properly so he would suck out a mouthful and spit it into a dipper, over and over, until he had enough. No one ever picked up on this unorthodox manner of serving cider.

All the children had chores. For Aunt Gertie the most memorable was the shared responsibility with little sister Evvie of decapitating a live chicken. The way Gertie remembers it, she was supposed to hold the chicken firmly while Evvie dealt it a fatal slice. However, Evvie missed, Gertie let go, and the chicken escaped. In Evvie’s retelling of this very same tale, it was Evvie that held the chicken for Gertie to deliver the fatal blow, but Gertie proved to be too squeamish, hence, the slice wasn’t fatal, and the girls had to chase down the sorrowful chicken. On Saturday mornings Gertie’s regular chore was to bake two cakes, one for Saturday dinner and one for Sunday company dinner. Since there were no vacuum cleaners sister Evvie was responsible for dusting and sweeping the floors. Evvie was a bit of a blithe spirit however and was often discovered playing the Victrola and dancing, with her feet flying, around the

room instead of applying herself to the task at hand. On the road going to Zion lived two very old men, Jimmy and Abe, in a log cabin. After finishing milking the cow and his other home chores, Gertie's big brother Harry would walk down the road to the cabin and help them "sweep" the snow when it got to be too much for them.

The Danberry children had time to play too. One of their favorite spots on their property was Roaring Rocks, which is still a popular sightseeing spot in what is now Somerset County Sourland Preserve. One of Gertie and Evvie's earliest memories was the "great" springtime outing with their mother and siblings to pay their respects at the Danberry family cemetery on Long Hill Road. They would carry a basket of manure from the farm and plant flowers on the family graves. The girls recall admiring a fancy gravesite with a picket fence, a picture of the deceased, and wax flowers in a glass case.

And of course they all went to school. They had to cross Rock Brook, which was much bigger than it is now, over a long bridge. Gertie recalls that it seemed like a river at the time but when she returned to look at it in the 1990's it had dwindled to not much more than a trickle. After heavy rains the bridge would be under water, too dangerous to cross on foot, so their father would drive them over the bridge to school in a wagon. The school day started, as it does now, with the flag salute. The special treat was a regular Friday afternoon "break" when all the students would be allowed free choice writing to "write any kind of story you like." The man teacher was quite strict although he considered Gertie to be a good student. When he got particularly annoyed he would shake the boys "the living daylights out of them" so violently that the buttons popped off their shirts. They dared not go home in that state of disrepair or their parents would mete out worse punishment. Kind old Jimmy and Abe, whose cabin was on their way home, would help them sew the buttons back on before they had to face their parents' wrath. The superintendent of grammar schools would visit occasionally from Somerville. He saw potential in Gertie- she had good handwriting and loved to read and write- and tried to intervene to help her get higher

education, but that would have meant living away from home and Gertie's father would never allow that.

Long before television news brought everything into one's living room scary stories would circulate in the Sourlands. Once a little girl home from the Crisafuli family alone was murdered by an itinerant stranger who then hid out in the woods near Roaring Rocks. They hunted for him a long time. He was eventually apprehended but until then the area children lived in fear that he would come for them.

Health care in the early part of the twentieth century failed to heal chronic conditions which today are often curable. Gertie and Evvie's older sister Cora as a teenager developed what the doctor called "abscesses" which Gertie later realized was cancer. She was very ill for a long time and her uncles from Trenton brought chocolates for Cora as a special treat when they came to visit. In her seventeenth and eighteenth years Cora lay in bed and "just wasted away." Cora and her little brother Theodore are buried in the Danberry family cemetery deep in the woods off Long Hill Road. Her epitaph reads:

*Dearest daughter thou has*

*Left us and thy loss we deeply feel.*

*It is God who has bereft us*

*He will all our sorrows shield.*

Brother Martin was born extremely hard of hearing. Although his parents took him to a specialist in New York City he did not receive any successful early intervention, and consequently never learned to speak. The family tried several crude devices, such as a sort of "ear trumpet." People thought of him as a "deaf-mute" and did not recognize his intelligence or his natural talents as a barber and as an artist, neither of which required speaking ability. Martin died at an early age of pneumonia.

When Gertie was thirteen, the third youngest, she noticed her mother was gaining weight and that she had added a piece of string to her apron ties. One day Gertie heard an odd sound from another room but thought it was either “a rooster crowing or one of the animals outside.” It was great shock to discover her mother had delivered a baby brother! Grandma, Elizabeth Whitehead Grey, was sent for and when Gertie cried and cried, feeling sorry for her mother, Grandma reassured her that “God sent him to be his mother’s helper.”

Parents were much loved and respected. Both girls and boys had to help with family chores until they got married and left home. In Gertie and Evvie’s teenage years “city people” from Jersey City would come up to the Mountain on vacation and they would hold dances on Saturday nights. Someone would play the fiddle, another a harmonica, and the young people would dance to the music at banjo player, Edward Boehm’s cabin on Zion Road. Turns out, Edward Boehm, who fought in the Civil War, was Evvie’s future husband, Edward Evans Lake’s grandfather, and quite a colorful character in his own right. Once Gertie was offered a big treat- to visit her Aunt Eliza who lived in Trenton. The aunt promised to take her shopping in the big city and buy her a “doll baby” and other toys. But Gertie was so terribly homesick that the very first night she demanded that her brother Harry drive her back home in his buggy, cutting short his intended courting of a young lady in Trenton. Gertie never left home again until she was married!

It is hard for us, a hundred years later, to imagine what it must have been like to live such a hard life far from any city lights, without television, cars, and so many other conveniences that we take for granted. But there were strong family values and a work ethic that provided a sense of security and self worth. Jeannie’s Grandmother, Evvie, compared her childhood to that of *‘Anne of Green Gables’*, after viewing the series in 1997, and identified with Anne in a knowing and loving way.

Andrea Bonette with Jeannie Geremia