

George E. Rohrer

I was not yet 13 years old when I first met George. He was obviously a very handsome man possessed of a fine muscular body produced by hard work while employed by the Borough of Mt. Lakes. I immediately liked this man and in time grew to love him and to emulate him as much as possible. He became a roll model for me and sparked my interest in Engineering. His association with my sister Marion was of little interest to me at that time although I was always delighted to see him come to our Larchdell Way home. George also became attached to our Boston Bull Dog "Cricket". He loved to play with Cricket in our back yard. Cricket, a very strong dog, loved to grasp the end of a piece of rope and have George twirl him around in a large circle. Fun for all.

George gave my younger sister and me nick names. They were: General & Major-standing for General Nuisance and Major Tired. As I remember I was the General. These names were both used lightly in good-natured fun. A couple of years later when I was sent to Military School in New York, General sounded pretty good to me. More often George called me Nels (pronounced Nelts) reflecting my middle name -Nelson.

I was always interested in hearing his stories about his time (first) in South America. A fun one was: The Hunting Trip.

One day George and a friend decided to go hunting in the jungle. They took a vehicle of some sort and drove into the jungle as far as conditions permitted. They left the vehicle and proceeded on foot always being on the alert for some animal they could bag. After walking for some time through dense jungle they spotted a pair of eyes peering at them through the dense undergrowth. They stopped, crouched and contemplated their prey not wanting scare it off. They decided to shoot and after a bit of a fusillade they cautiously approached their intended prey to find that they had hit it right between the eyes or more correctly right between the headlights. They had shot their vehicle. They had walked in a circle.

An earlier story involves his time working on the Railroad. From all accounts he enjoyed the railroad. I have no indication as to which railroad. He seemed to enjoy sitting in the caboose in an upper seat where he could see forward over the whole train to the engine. I believe his job was known as Flagman. In those days all communication between train crewmembers was via visual aids, i.e. flags, lanterns at night and the engine whistle. When a train was forced to stop along the road for any reason, flag men had to go forward several cars and to the rear a few hundred yards in order to pass signals to and from the engine.

On this occasion, George went forward many cars to be in sight of the rear flagman as well as the engineer. When this particular difficulty was over, the engineer tooted the appropriate signal and the train began to move forward. The rear flagman hurried back to the slowly moving caboose. George thought that it would be easy to merely stand his ground and catch on to the caboose as it passed by. This thinking became flawed as the train (probably empty cars) gained speed more rapidly than expected. Realizing this at some point, George started running toward the oncoming and now rapidly moving

caboose. When his target finally reached him it was moving at such a speed that George thought it unsafe to attempt to grasp the handrail and attempt to swing aboard. There he stood watching the train move away. I never found out if or how he caught up with his train or whether this was the end of his railroad days.

I always enjoyed looking at and touching his surveying instruments and having him explain, broadly, how they worked. Also most interesting were his bows and arrows, which he brought back from South America. These were native items and he would explain how they worked and what the different arrows were intended for. I hope these items still exist. These associations brought me to love this man and have great respect for him.

Though not a point of pride I cannot continue this narrative without mentioning the difficulties that George encountered at 21 Larchdell Way. My mother could be a difficult person and tended to be very judgmental. Ella had little to justify her judgmental posture, as her background was not “upper class” but comparatively humble. She eloped with my father at a young age and married outside her Roman Catholic faith. Each of her two sisters married good Catholic men but men of very little economic potential. Ella was fortunate enough to marry a man of high potential and drive. He worked his way up in the business world and held a seat on the New York Mercantile Exchange for many years and maintained an office suite in that exchange building which was then located at 6 Harrison St. That exchange is presently located in the World Trade Center. His position afforded his family a home in Mt. Lakes and private schools for Marion and me.

Unfortunately this position at a fairly early age caused Ella to become somewhat unkind to those less fortunate. Certainly being “out of work” during the Great Depression was no reason look down on any person so afflicted. There were 16,000,000 men out of a population of around 120,000,000 out of work and with little hope. None pursued employment with more vigor than did George Rohrer. His lack of work was not in any way related to lack of effort, intelligence, skills, ability or personality. It was a bad time. My mother was unable to grasp these facts and tended to discourage the union between Marion and George. Thank God she failed.

My father was not so minded. He liked George and certainly was understanding of the employment problem. He helped George all he could and still keep peace. The eggs that George sold in Mt. Lakes were supplied by my father who brought them out from his cold storage building in New York. I have vivid memory of the day that George left for South America for the second time. My father told me that he was sad to see George leave and that he would miss him very much. I agreed.

At the tender age of 14 I was not able to fully appreciate the emotional difficulty that George as well as Marion went through when he was forced to leave for an employment opportunity so far from home. Certainly a measure of the man.

I am sure that Ella’s feelings toward George changed as time went by. My mother’s world started to crumble shortly after the wedding when my father became seriously ill and died at age 52. Things at once became less grand for her and probably changed her perspective

for the better although I don't think she ever lost her ability to pass judgement. I believe that the selling of the Larchdell Way home and moving back to her roots in Buffalo quite near her sisters was not the joy she thought it would be. At one point she confided in me that she wished we were back in Mt. Lakes. I digressed into this bit of history as it related to George.

Somehow I don't remember that George worked for George Peterson in Albany, N.Y. I do remember the Washington time very well as I was a visitor there during the summer in, I believe, 1936. I remember their apartment well and that it was directly opposite the then under construction Washington Episcopal Cathedral. On the same grounds as the Cathedral there was a very small stone church in which George preferred to worship. He felt that the Cathedral with all of its trappings and its immense cost were not in keeping with his idea of Christian worship. The music was great but the rest a little too much. On several evenings while I was there we did one of his favorite things; that was to attend a band concert performed by either the Marine, Navy or Army Band. The concerts were outstanding and the cost was just about right: Free. I did also see the building site where George worked which was the Federal Reserve Building. We also made the trip to Mt. Vernon. While there and looking at the map of the grounds, I spotted a building adjacent to the main house marked "smoke house". I thought: poor George Washington, Martha made him go to another building to have a smoke. I wanted to see this building. Surprise. An empty building charred black on the inside with a few hams hanging from the rafters. So much for semantics. I had a very enjoyable time with the newlyweds and they appeared to be doing very well and enjoying Washington.

One night George wanted to see the movie Viva Villa. It was in a dingy little movie house in a very dingy part of Washington. George loved the historic picture but we were all glad to get out of the theater alive. He loved history.

George loved his little house on Intervale Rd. It was his first house. I knew the house well as a good friend of mine had lived there previously and I had been there several times. The house was set back from the road and quite private which was exactly to his liking. That is where Cocoa the Doberman Pincher came into the picture. He was a great dog and a girl friend of mine had his twin. Remember, in those days all heating and much of the cooking was done with coal and temperatures were hand regulated. To control the furnace one had to manipulate a pair of chains that came up through the floor from the cellar to the living area. One day during my fathers long illness Marion was called to Larchdell Way for some emergency or other. She had adjusted the chains for heat and forgot to readjust them when she was called away in haste. Poor Cocoa. When Marion returned some time later Cocoa was nearly finished from the intense heat. The candles on their dining table were melted into a puddle and I believe the house was almost to the point of spontaneous combustion. It was a very close call for dog and house.

I believe that the Rohrer move to Larchdell Way was done to help Ella manage and I hope to ease the Rohrer rent burden. I guess I had not, as yet, taken up my responsibilities. In any event their time there was short as the house was sold and my family moved to Buffalo in April 1942. And the Rohrer's moved to York Rd. In Mt. Lakes for a short stay during which John Rohrer was born.

I remember visiting the Manor Lake home which George loved dearly. The solitude and quiet were just right for him. Norma and I visited there in August of the year we were married. I remember the huge fireplace, which George was so proud of. Obviously not operating in August. My memory is focused because we were there on Aug. 6, 1945 when the report of the Hiroshima bombing took place. We were all amazed and a bit frightened when we learned the horrible details of the event. It sure put an end to that war.

Our visit to The Cornelia St. house is not as vivid. We were there in July of 1947. Carolyn was 6 months old and we made the trip pulling a trailer in order to carry luggage and an ice chest needed for baby formula. With us were my mother and mother in law. What a crowd. Pulling that trailer over the Penn. Mountains with a 1937 6 Cyl. Car made me pledge never ever to pull a trailer again. I have kept that pledge. I dreaded the trip home. Other details of that visit escape me.

The move to Towaco and into the first house that the Rohrer's owned was a major event. The location of that house was a further indication of George's love of being far from the Madding Crowd. At last George had what he had wanted so long and worked so hard for.

One day during a visit to Towaco, I went to New York and visited George's office at 26 Broadway. At that time his position was to gather geologic information from the Socony oil fields throughout the world. He would compile and condense that information, question the field for any needed additional information and prepare to present it to the Board of Directors on a periodic basis. This included preparing certain maps indicating various geologic data. He personally made the presentations to the Board. I was very impressed. I was past 30 by then, was in the early days of my engineering experience and was very appreciative of the quality of what I saw. This is in keeping with the Robert Rohrer comments on the Alexander Hamilton Institute Letter.

Our visits to New Jersey were truncated in the early 50s as we had moved from Buffalo to Elma and then to East Aurora as we did not want to raise our children in the city.

It was God's will that I was in the New York area on business in February, 1953. I knew how ill George was and somehow (didn't have a car) made my way to Morristown and to Memorial Hospital. I visited George there and prayed for him. He did not know that I was there as he was in a coma by that time. I held his hand and cried my eyes out. I was the last family member to see him alive. He passed away later that night by which time I had managed to get to Towaco in time for the bad news to reach there. I had the Job of telling Bob and John that their Father was gone. I shall never forget that day. I believe that it was providential that I was there and able to be of some help, which was puny, I am sure. It was equally providential that I was at the Hospital at the time of George's surgery. Again on business in the area. I was able to support Marion. I will never forget the sight of the Surgeon coming down the hall after the surgery. He told us then that he was not able to remove all of the cancer and that the prognosis was negative. A terrible moment and I was glad to be there to help Marion.

This thought is perhaps out of place but in view of all the disclosures in the Robert Rohrer piece on George's life it must be stated. I had absolutely no knowledge regarding George's parents. The names were all new to me. When I asked Marion about them, she simply told me that they had died when George was young. I accepted that as fact and never asked again.

In February 1953, I lost a friend and a brother that I loved dearly. I think of him often even today and revere his memory. While writing this piece, and reflecting on his life my eyes have filled with tears several times. Admittedly my tears are usually pretty close to the surface these days as I can't get past my own loss. By contrast, Norma and I were very fortunate to have been able to spend 55 years together. The thought that George had at last struggled to the top only to be cut down makes me very sad, as I am sure it did to all that knew him.

I trust that these words have contributed in some small way to the story of George Rohrer an extraordinary and fine man. It was a privilege to be a part of his extended family.

Sincerely and with love

Lewiston, N.Y.