



**The Elsey Girls at Home. Martha Elsey Reynolds, Pat Elsey Bacon and Lenore Elsey Bovay**

## **The Elsey Sisters and Their Contributions to the De Kalb Community**

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Looking back from our setting in the 2020s, it is easy to see the fast pace of change in our world and assume slower and simpler decades that preceded us. Attention to the details of any decade of the twentieth century in De Kalb, however, reminds us that change was constant for individuals. Furthermore, a focus on one family in De Kalb in those years illustrates how individual and family experiences contributed to the town's history.

To learn more about the consolidation of the Hermon-De Kalb Central School in the 1950s, I interviewed Lenore Bovay and Pat Bacon, two members of the Elsey family, who had lived through that process. Those interviews, however, were rich in details that went far beyond school consolidation. At the same time, local newspaper reports covered daily lives with stories that had long since slipped the memories of characters in the narratives. Taken together, news reports from the time period and memories of those earlier days, give us one picture of years quickly receding in our rearview mirror. All the material in the articles comes from two interviews done in August and September of 2022 and from newspaper articles listed below.

Lenore and Pat Elsey were the two middle daughters of Elmer and Dorothy (Matteson) Elsey, who ran a dairy farm on Rundell Road, now called Jeffers Road, just southeast of the hamlet of De Kalb Junction. Along with their older sister Mary Anne and their younger sister Martha, they were the only children they could recall living on Rundell Road, with its three homes, in the 1930s and 1940s when they were growing up. While a newspaper report in 1955 described the soil of the area as thin and barely covering rock outcroppings, they remember their family's farm as one that produced good crops. Both Elmer and Dorothy were from De Kalb families. Their mother Dorothy had graduated from the School of Agriculture at St. Lawrence University in 1924 and had worked as a dietician before her marriage and years of homemaking.

Lenore's and Pat's earliest years were ones of the Great Depression and World War II. Both born in the first half of the 1930s, they remember being at home much of the time. Their father, however, greatly enjoyed movies, so trips to the theater in Canton were common. In fact, movies during the war years shaped their understanding of the war. Much of daily life, however, was focused on local events.

The Matteson side of the family was a musical one. Their Great-Uncle Tom Matteson played a clarinet in the De Kalb Junction Cornet Band. His brother, Lenore and Pat's Grandfather Matteson, played a violin. Dorothy was a pianist who played for church, wedding, and community events. As her four daughters grew up, she accompanied their vocal quartet and their solo instruments. Lenore remembers somewhat trying Sunday afternoons playing her violin with her grandfather while her mother accompanied them on the piano. "And he never would finish anything, because he'd stop and do it again. You know, because we didn't do it right." Lenore and Pat laughed about their quartet, a musical effort their mother pushed. "Some [were] more talented than others, I think," said Pat. They may be the harshest judges of their efforts. Newspaper reports noted their music not only in church but at a Grange event and a De Kalb banquet.

Since neighbor children were not a part of life on the farm, both Lenore and Pat remember looking forward to school as a place to be with their peers. They were close enough to De Kalb Junction to attend Union Free School in a substantial brick building that housed village children from first through twelfth grades.<sup>i</sup> An important memory was a new aluminum building which added a gymnasium, typing and music rooms, and a cafeteria to the original building.

Lenore cannot remember a subject she did not like, except perhaps Latin. Pat was partial to English and history. Test scores of individual students were regularly published in the newspapers, confirming that Lenore and Pat were strong students. Newspaper reports also show the Elsey sisters as class officers, cheerleaders and attending ice skating parties.

Lenore remembers few teachers covering many high school courses. Albert Architzel was the principal and business teacher. Mary Wake was the science teacher. Alice Bigelow taught history and Latin. And Mrs. Desmond taught English. Lenore also remembers Anna Harriet Barber who taught music and introduced Lenore to Dr. Samuel Spurbeck in the Crane department of music at Potsdam State Teachers College, who Lenore studied under her first summer at the college.

Lunches being served at school began while Lenore and Pat were in school. Hot soup was cooked on the top floor of the building where high school students studied and was carried downstairs for students in the lower grades. One day a little girl darted out in front of someone carrying a pot of hot soup and was badly burned when the hot soup splashed on her.

As with home life, music was a focus for the Elsey sisters in school. Lenore played the baritone horn in the band and sang in chorus. And with two other student violinists—Pansy Pike and Goodwin Gardner—and teacher Barber, the flutist, she made quartet music not necessarily to perform but because “we enjoyed it.” Pat played clarinet in the band. In one concert reported on in the local news, younger sister Martha played a mellophone. While neither of them remembers much about the long and contentious process of Hermon De Kalb Central School in the 1950s, Pat does remember getting new band uniforms when the school colors went from crimson and gray to green and gold.

It was Pat’s memories of 1952 and 1953 that made clear that while consolidation of the the two school districts had occurred in terms of administration, for students much remained unchanged. The only De Kalb students who had interaction with their peers in Hermon were those who took a home economics course—two young women, as she remembers it—students like her future husband, Sanford Bacon, who played on a sports team, and students in band. Part of the Pat’s enjoyment of the band in her last two years was getting to meet Hermon students. The one other event that united students from De Kalb and from Hermon was the senior class trip.

These trips were major events documented in newspaper reports and cemented in memory. They required substantial fundraising, at which De Kalb students must have excelled. Lenore’s class of 1951 raised enough money that rather than a full train trip from De Kalb Junction to Washington DC to New York City and home, they flew from DC to New York City. Pat’s 1953 class helped the Hermon students pay for their trip with the excess funds they raised. One of her main memories was eating from the automat in Grand Central Station. Another memory was the

two male teachers, who with their wives chaperoned the trip but disappeared for their own pursuits in the city. “It’s a good thing we were good kids.” There was a dress code of suits for the young women in the class. Pat remembers her suit having a pin honoring Elizabeth II, since 1953 was the year of her coronation.

When Lenore graduated from high school in 1951, the student publication “The Junctionette” predicted that she would one day be the head of Crane. The prediction undoubtedly indicated that peers were impressed that Lenore had been accepted into the music program. Lenore, however, found the Crane regimen beyond her interests and shifted to elementary education, although music always remained central to her classrooms. She attended Potsdam Teachers College before classes had been moved to the new campus being built. So every day she walked on plank sidewalks from the dorms on the new campus to the classrooms in what is today called Old Snell Hall in the center of the village.



Lenore graduated from Potsdam in 1954 and that fall began teaching first grade in the Gouverneur School District. After a break for her first child, she moved to the Hermon–De Kalb School District in 1956. From that year until 1987, she taught first and third grades and for the majority of time kindergarten. Taken together, her teaching years were housed in the basement of a Baptist church, a rural one-room schoolhouse, the old De Kalb school building, a Methodist church building in Hermon, and in the original Hermon–De Kalb School District building and in its quickly remodeled version that included all K-12 students from the district. The music from her

early years echoed in her classroom in the new school since, at some point, she moved her mother's piano into her classroom.

Pat attended Watertown School of Commerce after graduating earning a degree that led to a position in the Registrar's Office at St. Lawrence University. By the time Hermon-De Kalb School District's new building was under construction, she remembers pushing her oldest daughter in a stroller from De Kalb Junction to the site to observe the process.

Both Lenore and Pat raised their families in De Kalb Junction while continuing to be active in community and church life, including working for and serving as officers in the Town of De Kalb Historical Association.

Newspaper coverage:

*The Tribune-Press* (Gouverneur, NY), Feb. 8, 1950; Apr. 5, 1950

*Ogdensburg Journal*, May 3, 16, June 1, 17, Nov. 22, 1950; Feb. 7, Mar. 14, May 4, June 18, Aug. 4, 1951; Sept. 17, 1953; Apr. 30, 1955.

*Commercial Advertiser* (Potsdam Junction, NY), Mar. 13, 1951; June 15, Aug. 4, Sept. 14, 1954; Mar. 10, Apr. 30, 1956; June 20, Oct. 1, 1957; May 11, 1960

*The Racquette* (Potsdam, NY) Feb. 20, 1954

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