WINONA: A BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Dr. Winona Welch at nearly 92 impresses all who meet her with her strength, her intellectual vitality, and her unaffected joy in life. It is not given to all of us to live so long; it is given to even fewer of us to have lived so well. A Hoosier from the heartland of America, hers has been a very American kind of life, full of such old-fashioned virtues as integrity, thrift, diligence, dedication. In such a life the Protestant work ethic, once so much respected and lately too much scorned, is seen at its best—productive, generous, and wholly admirable.

Winona Hazel Welch was born in 1896 on a farm in Jasper County, Indiana, three miles northeast of the town of Goodland. It is flat country—long ago it was prairie, part of the vast sea of grass that covered the middle of the continent before the long line of pioneers and the moldboard plow transformed it forever. Her paternal grandfather, George Welch, was one of those pioneers. Born in England, he was brought up in New York State and bought his Indiana land just before going off to serve the Union cause in the Civil War for four long years. Winona cherishes a history of the Seventeenth Indiana, her grandfather’s regiment. There is a poignant report of one defeat (the Munfordsville Affair) before the final victory:

The march through Kentucky from Bowling Green to Brandenburg was a very severe one, the men suffering very much for food and making hard marches; but as soon as Indiana was reached, the people all along their route turned out to see them and bring them food, and not only this, but followed the command in wagons hauling the sick and tired.

Sergeant Major George Welch was among the wounded. The war was a bitter experience that he never spoke about, but Winona and her younger sister, Helen, were proud of his record. Some mementos survive—a little tatting shuttle that he carved from the root of a tree while a soldier (it is now in the Indiana Museum) and his sword, given to Winona as the oldest grandchild.

The girls’ maternal grandfather, David Merritt Johnson, moved westward from New York State also. His farm adjoined the Welch farm and eventually, when George Welch’s son Charles married “Met” Johnson’s daughter Carrie, the farms were combined. Winona and her sister still own that farm today, and, although she is not now and never will be the sort of person who lives in the past, it pleases her to have that visible reminder of her childhood. Thinking of it can still quicken scenes in her memory: “When we finished planting corn we could go fishing up at the Iroquois River” she recalls, “and then when the corn was husked and all in the crib, then we could have an oyster stew.”

Since there were no boys in the family, the two girls did their share of chores and more, but certain jobs were special and earned special payment. Winona always had a pet lamb to raise and one birthday her grandfather gave her a calf to feed from a baby’s bottle—money earned when the animals were sold was hers to save. Feeding and caring for the hens and chickens earned the girls the proceeds from the 12th egg box and one-third of the money gained when any chickens were sold. On the 4th of July, each child was given 25 cents for fireworks, great riches in those days. Winona always saved 15 cents of hers—the habit of thrift, if not inborn, was learned early and well on a working farm in Indiana in the first years of this century.

Life on the farm was simple and plain, centered on work and worship. The parents were strict but loving, the family devoted. School was a one-room country school a quarter of a mile north—Winona has a vivid memory of her first day there, bravely dressed in a favorite little red jacket, the youngest and smallest of
It was a good school where children were expected to and did learn what they were taught, minus such frills as computers and visual aids. Winona thinks they learned better than children today to whom so much is given but from whom so little is expected. From the first, she loved it—loved learning—loved teaching so much that at home it was a favorite game to conduct lessons with the family cat or her dolls as pupils.