

Lorton History - One Woman's Campaign

Turning a creek into a river

By Shawn Drury

This is a story about what one person can do if they are convinced their cause is just and they have the tenacity and dedication to see the struggle through to the end.

On May 18, 1891, a baby named Mary Rose Rena Springmann was born to Joseph M. and Emma Jane (Plaskett) Springmann, in Lorton. Joseph Springmann ran a store in Lorton and was the RF&P Railroad Agent. In fact, the train station at Lorton was called Springmann for a short time. The Springmann family lived in a lovely Victorian-inspired house near the station.

At a very young age Mary Rose went to stay with her aunt Rosa in Washington. From that time until the age of 15 she would travel between Lorton and Washington spending time in both locations and going to school mostly in Washington. Since her father was the railroad agent, her family received free passes and could travel virtually anywhere the railroad went at no charge. Then, in 1908 her mother died and she took over the duties of running the household and helped in her father's store.

In January of 1909, Mary Rose (now known as Rosemary) married Silas Selecman and moved to Occoquan. In November of that year her first child was born. The young family lived in several different houses in Occoquan until moving to 119 Washington Street in 1913, a home Rosemary would occupy until her death in 1980. The early days were difficult for the young mother. With no indoor plumbing, water had to be carried from a spring for drinking as well as laundry. It was a favorite ploy of Rosemary to have her children carry small buckets of water to keep them out of mischief and to let them know that they were being a help to her.

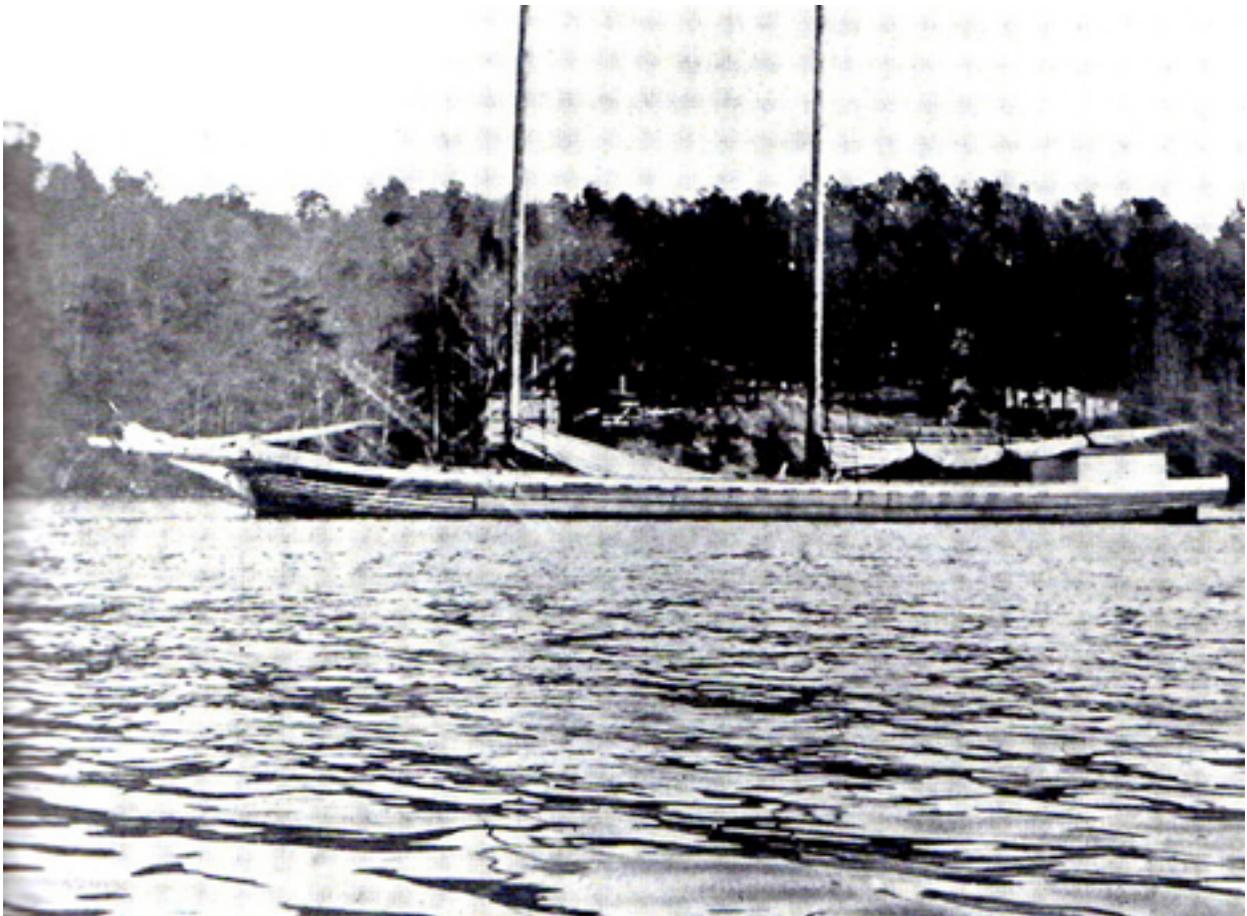
Remarkably, at the age of 52 years, Rosemary took a war service job in Washington, D.C. during World War II. She continued working for 15 years, part of which time she traveled Shirley Highway (I-95) after its construction in the late 1940's. It was during these daily commutes that she saw something that raised her ire and caused her to launch a campaign to right what she believed to be an historic wrong.

Each day as she passed over the Occoquan, she read a sign that said Occoquan Creek. "I felt I was almost insulted by the sign saying, 'Occoquan Creek.' My husband's people, who had been here for hundreds of years, called it river, always, and I felt like it was doing them an injustice allowing it to be called a creek, when I know they called it a river." Additionally, almost every map and document relating to the Occoquan before 1900 referred to it as a river. Certainly any reference made in records during the Civil War period called it Occoquan River. Somehow, and no one knows exactly why, or who was responsible, in the time between 1900 and 1910 it was changed to creek. And creek it remained. Until Rosemary Selecman came along.

Her first foray into campaigning for the change to river was to enlist the assistance of Action Line, a public service arm of the Washington Star newspaper. She received no response. She then wrote the Rambler, a column in the Washington Star. Still no help. It

was not until she wrote to "National Geographic Magazine" that she got an answer back. "They are the ones who guided me to what to do. They told me what to do," said Ms. Selecman. Little did she realize that her battle was just beginning. It took over two years of research, providing maps and other historical documentation, and numerous pieces of correspondence to local politicians, state officials, the Board of Geographic Names, Federal officials and even into the halls of Congress before she was able to make her quest become a reality. A simple question; "If it WAS a river, then who demoted it to a creek over 150 years later!" was what Ms. Selecman wanted to know.

Although we may never know the who in answer to that question, we can rest in the knowledge that this historical wrong was finally righted. It was done by a single person, an 80-year old great-grandmother, who recognized a just cause, wanted history to be accurate, and did something about it. This was truly one woman's campaign.



In this undated photo a two-masted vessel rests on the Occoquan River near the town of Occoquan. Credit the Occoquan Historical Society.



Sign affixed to the old truss bridge calling the Occoquan a creek. Credit the May 5, 1971 Potomac News.

