CHAPTER ONE

The Early Days: Lucy's Log Cabin

"Every noble work is at first impossible."

Carlyle

The original Brachtendorf log cabin, near where Bracken Lane is today, was converted into a barn in 1897.

A Northfield settler—the late 1800's

"I hate to compare us unfavorably to Winnetka. But they have a program whereby oldsters steeped in history talk to school kids. They relive history.
"Surely Northfield is not so sparsely endowed that it has no past—nothing to look back upon!"

Betty Crookes, *Pioneer Press*, 1974

It was a long time ago—1857, to be exact, when one of the first horse-drawn wagons with a family in tow came to settle in Northfield.

Mary Young arrived that year with her teenage daughter Mary who had just married a young farmer, Henry Brachtendorf. All were immigrants from Germany. The two young people met and married in Chicago.

Henry, his bride and his mother-in-law came to Northfield to claim some government land so they could farm and raise a family. From Chicago, they followed the Green Bay Trail up past the beginnings of Northwestern University. From there, they headed north and west a few miles. Henry Brachtendorf staked his claim in a scrub forest—land we know today as Bracken Lane.

Henry made a clearing in the woods and built a cabin, chinking the logs with mud. There, he and Mary had four children: Peter in 1860; Lucy in 1862; Henry in 1864; and Julia in 1866.

The same year Julia was born, Henry died. His wife was 24—left to raise four children, all under six, on an acre of cleared farmland, in a one-room cabin, with an axe and a rifle.

Nearly ninety years later, Mary's daughter Lucy would tell the *Pioneer Press* how her mother rigged up a calico curtain in that log cabin, with her two brothers sleeping on one side and the two girls and their mom on the other. Heat came from a wood stove—but never enough to make them warm, Lucy said. Candles were used for light.

"My brothers had a horse that everyone kidded them about," Lucy recalled. "It had a stiff, straight neck, without any curve. But it pulled the wagon—and that's what counted."

The family survived with the help of neighbors. John Happ, for whom Happ Road was later named, arrived with his nine sons and daughter about the same time as the Brachtendorfs.

Happ, a blacksmith, arrived in Winnetka in 1843 from Trier, Germany. He built his first log cabin in Winnetka and ran a successful blacksmith shop until the railroad first came through Winnetka in 1854. With the collapse of his business, Happ sold his land in Winnetka for $3 an acre. He moved his family west, near the Brachtendorfs, where he could farm and start a new blacksmith shop with his sons. He died just a few years later, dividing his land between his boys.

The Brachtendorf boys raised pigs to make ends meet after their father suddenly died in 1866. While they farmed, their sister Lucy went to work at age 14 cleaning houses in Evanston for $1 a week.

Happ's grandson John would one day become Northfield's first village president. And his nephew George would open the first gas station in town, a one-pump operation near the corner of Sunset Ridge and Willow, right next to the Brachtendorfs.

Dennis Donovan lived east of the Brachtendorfs. A native of Ireland, he settled in Massachusetts, then journeyed with his family to Northfield in a coal wagon in 1855. His daughter Julia, who was five, lived in Northfield all her life.

Julia liked to tell of the family's travels across the tangle of trees and undergrowth, and across the Skokie Swamp, to stake out their claim of land, which her father cleared by hand. The deed to the Donovan's land, signed by President James Polk, gave him the conventional "forty acres for half a hundred dollars"—or $1.25 an acre.

Census data from the 1860's shows the Donovans and Brachtendorfs having 15 cows, seven hogs and a wagon apiece.

While the young Brachtendorf boys were pig farmers, Donovan made charcoal, which he hauled into Chicago with an ox team. He also raised chickens and cows. His wife smoked a pipe.

Donovan's daughter Julia never married. She lived in the family's log cabin all her life. By the turn of the century she would be known as "Old Maid Donovan"—the lady with a cow who helped make ends meet by boarding the local school teacher.

Across the street from the Brachtendorfs and Donovans was Charles Metz. He came from Germany in 1861 to farm, buying 13 acres where Somerset Lane is today.

Horseradish was the crop of choice for the founding families. It took a lot of work—but it cost nothing to farm once you grew a few roots. Labor was no problem either. A farmer's wife and children always helped.

Packing hay was another profitable crop. Each fall, farmers like the Brachtendorf boys would head for Skokie Swamp to collect the stuff for free. They'd load the hay high on wagons and sell it to merchants who used it to ship goods like china and glassware.

Charles Metz tried pickle farming in 1882. His pay was sixty cents for a bushel of 500 cucumbers "delivered in strict conformity with this agreement and entirely free from nubbins and unsound pickles." He stayed in the pickle business one year.

Those were some of the early settlers in Northfield who helped raise the four, fatherless Brachtendorf children.

And of course, the children helped themselves.

To make ends meet, young Lucy hitched a bobsled to the family's straight-necked horse and traveled to Evanston at age 14. She took her first job there doing housework for $1 a week.

Lucy also worked for the Seul family, which sixty years later would open Seul's Tavern in Northfield. Lucy helped take care of all 11 Seul children after their mother was accidentally killed by a stray rifle shot while riding in a lumber cart down Illinois Road. The gunman was a squirrel hunter from Chicago whose rifle had misfired. Mrs. Seul and her husband were traveling to the funeral of their friend and neighbor, John Happ, seventh son of the early settler.

Young Lucy would grow up to be a force in Northfield. Those early years gave her the tenacity and fortitude to take on anyone. And the family land gave her power. She lived most of her life in a home her bachelor brothers built for $90 in 1897, right next to the family's original log cabin. Thirty years later they re-

John Brown (right), a farmer, donated one-quarter of an acre of his land to build Brown School, which opened in 1892 on the northeast corner of Sunset Ridge and Willow Roads.

modeled their house because Mary Young insisted. The house still stands on 2264 Willow Road.

Lucy would remember how her mother told her before she died in 1927, "Lucy, you're not going to have anyone wait on you the way you've been waiting on me. You better get this house fixed up so you can take care of it yourself!" So Lucy did. She spent the rest of her life there and in 1952 would tell the *Pioneer Press:* "I'm 90 and I'm proud of it. I feel like I'm 16."

This was Northfield.

As for schools in the early years, it was 1855, about the same time settlers first came to Northfield, that the state passed a law requiring that local schools be formed, using property tax dollars collected by the township.

The first Northfield township tax collector was Henry Seul, widower and father of the 11 children that Lucy Brachtendorf had been hired to care for.

Seul collected taxes by riding his horse from farm to farm. Most of his tax money was paid in gold. By 1900, tax collecting had advanced—to horse and buggy. But Northfield farmers, who couldn't always afford their tax bill, found an ingenious way to keep up with the tax collector. At the turn of the century, farmers would gather their wagons at Wagner's farm to haul away 10 to 15 tons of gravel, depending on their tax bill. Traveling along the township's dirt roads, they'd fill the holes with gravel. The county, which got free upkeep for its roads, credited them with paying their tax bill in full.

Despite the tax money earmarked for education, Northfield had no school of its own. Winnetkans, on the other hand, elected their first school board in 1859 and hired their first teacher that same year for $20 a month. They also set up a budget: $5.75 for a Webster Dictionary; $17 to rent a school building; and $13 to buy a stove.

It took Northfield another 35 years to have a school and 65 years to organize its own school board.

Julia Donovan would tell the Chicago *Daily News* in 1937 how as a schoolgirl in the 1860's, "getting an education was a problem in many ways."

Julia traveled five miles to Wilmette where St. Joseph's Church had a school on Lake Ave. Other Northfield children journeyed west to Northbrook. "Snows were terrible then," Julia said, recalling how she and classmates walked over crusted snowdrifts that covered the crab apple trees.

The first sign that a school might be built in Northfield was a deed filed with the Chicago Title Company in 1878. John Brown, a farmer who lived on the property where Sunset Ridge Country Club stands today, donated a quarter of an acre of his land on the corner of Sunset Ridge and Willow. It took until 1892 for Northfield's first school—named after John Brown—to open: a small, one-room schoolhouse without plumbing or electricity and a pot-bellied stove for heat.

The little Brown School was part of District 5 until 1903. Then the county changed the number to 29. But nothing else changed. The county still ran the school with Northfield tax dollars. There was no school board and no local control.

Alex Levernier, who grew up in one of the first farmhouses on Happ Road, went to Brown School in the 1890's. He recalled in 1967 how he walked each day to the little brick school, passing the log cabins of Northfield's pioneer families

The Donovan family cows, grazing by Skokie Lagoon. In the late 1890's Northfield children made a sport after school of finding Julia Donovan's cow.

and acres of open land.

Levernier reflected: "Old Maid Donovan, who lived next door to the Brachtendorfs, had this cow that sometimes wandered off. I used to hunt it down after school with my friends."

He also remembered how Julia Donovan's dark little log cabin was neat as a pin. And he told of how the school teacher always lived at Donovan's. "But it's that cow I remember most," he said. "It would wander through the forest and swamps between Winnetka Avenue and Willow Road with a bell around its neck. We kids were always looking for that cow."