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CELESTIA RICE COLBY (1827-1900)

Change, Adapt, Persist. These three words can be used to tell the story of the life of Celestia Rice Colby. Throughout her life she experienced frequent changes in family, locations, lifestyles, and relationships. She changed and adapted to each of these, sometimes with difficulty and struggle. Finally, she **persisted** through all these challenges to remain true to herself and her personal dreams of becoming a woman of learning and letters.

Celestia was born December 19, 1827, in Andover, Ohio. Before she was two years old, her mother died. Celestia's father remarried a year later. Much of what is known about Celestia comes from her writings including diaries which she began keeping at an early age. She had few fond memories of her childhood and was not fond of her stepmother. But education brought her a sense of happiness. She first attended a **common school** in Cherry Valley, Ohio, where the family had moved shortly after her father's remarriage. Then at the age of fourteen, she was sent to a private school, The Grand River Institute, located some twenty miles from home.

The GRI (Grand River Institute) had just begun allowing women students in 1840. In its catalog, the GRI said it "admitted women on equal conditions with young men" and that it "did not differentiate between classes for men and women." It was here at the GRI that Celestia developed her strong sense of independence and a passion for social issues such as slavery and women's rights. The school was located in Austinburg, Ohio, which was a stop on the **Underground Railroad**.

After completing her education at the GRI, Celestia taught school in Ohio. Then in 1847, she became engaged to Lewis Colby, a young man she had known much of her life. They were married the following year and moved in with Lewis's parents who were dairy farmers in Cherry Valley. This was the end of Celestia's teaching career, another change and adjustment. This change proved difficult for Celestia who missed the intellectual life of education and what she felt was the loss of her personal identity. To complicate matters, Lewis was frequently gone on business trips.

In April 1850 Celestia gave birth to her first child, a son, whom they called Plummer. Her writings before the birth indicate that Celestia did not feel she was prepared to be a mother and worried that she would die during childbirth. This was a common fear at the time as in fact, many women did die. But Plummer was born a healthy baby to a healthy mother. Celestia seems then to have completed the change from teacher and scholar, to wife and mother.

But her writing continued. In 1851 the first of her essays were published by *The Ladies Repository*. Celestia wrote in her diary that the essay had been written "with a babe in my arms,

while one hand held the pen, the other was employed in soothing my little one to slumber and as a mother, of course, the mind is divided between them both.” This indicated a struggle Celestia continued to face between her personal dreams and family **obligations**.

Celestia and Lewis went on to have five children; two boys, Plummer and Branch, and two girls, Vine and June Rose. A fifth baby, named Thorn, was stillborn. Sadly, Plummer died when he was only three. Celestia took great pride in her children and wanted them to become accomplished adults of high **ideals** and good habits. Vine became a doctor, Branch an engineer with the Mississippi River Commission, and June Rose a professor of literature and Dean of Women at Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University).

During her early years as a dairy farmer’s wife, Celestia was in charge of the cheese making on their farm. This was hard work which demanded a great deal of her time. Between her duties as a farm wife and mother of a growing family, Celestia struggled to carry on her writing and intellectual life. She published articles on **temperance**, anti-slavery, and women’s rights as well as stories for women and children. She wrote that slavery was “an **inhuman** condition” which destroyed families. She also fought against the evils of alcohol saying it was “a woman’s duty to stop alcohol’s entrance into the home.” She also wrote that marriage was “either a cup of blessing or a fountain of **unmitigated** woe.” It appears that during these years, Celestia and Lewis were growing apart.

The family moved to Freeport, Illinois in 1866, where Lewis successfully changed careers by starting his own business selling **lightning rods**. Four years later they moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Vine, Branch, and June Rose all graduated from the University of Michigan. Tragically in 1872, Vine who had earned a medical doctorate from the University of Iowa died of a pelvic disease. Perhaps this loss of a third child put the final strains on their marriage and around 1882, Celestia and Lewis separated.

In the following years Celestia seemed to find a new happiness. She filled her days with reading, writing, education, women’s issues, and family. She now had time and opportunity to enjoy her passions and pursue her interests. She wrote for publications in Illinois and Michigan, and after moving to Normal, Illinois, to live with her daughter June Rose, joined the newly formed Normal History Club. This group was “dedicated to the **proposition** that women are created the intellectual equals with men;they have minds that are capable of the **acquisition** of knowledge, and have the ideas and **initiative** that can contribute to the quality of life in the community and beyond.”

On July 23, 1900, Celestia Rice Colby died after an illness of many months. She was remembered by *The Daily Pantagraph* as “a woman of remarkable **attainments** of the mind. She was a hardworking student all her life. Her papers were among the most scholarly productions heard by the Normal History Club. Her death causes general regret.” She is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Reviewing her life, it is apparent she did indeed meet the many changes and adapt to the challenges as student, teacher, farmwife, mother, and writer. She **persisted** in her desire to develop her intellectual life and freedoms as a woman and also help others to do so.