

Little Chute Historical Society 2010 Cemetery Walk

Petronella "Nellie" (Kilsdonk) Verstegen

Hello, my full name is Petronella Verstegen, but I was best known as "Nellie."

I was born on December 14th, 1885 in Kaukauna, Wisconsin. I am the oldest child of five born to my parents, Johannes and Mary (VanAsten) Kilsdonk. I am of Dutch descent. I attended school only through the 8th grade.

In 1908, I married John A. "Rube" Verstegen. We moved to Little Chute where we had nine children. The four boys were Leo (Baker), Paul (Lefty), Stanley (Bud) and Jerome (Boney) Verstegen. The five girls were Beatrice (Bea), Helen, Irene and Rita. One of my daughters (Agatha) preceded me in death.

I know that it will be hard for the younger generation to comprehend the hardships of our generation. During the years of raising our family, life was not always easy but we had a big garden, raised our own chickens and rabbits and had apple trees. I did a lot of canning to make things last. We had no running water for a while, but collected rain water which ran into a cistern where we pumped it up to the kitchen. Sometimes aging parents would also move in and my mother, Mary VanAsten Kilsdonk, lived with us for many years before she passed away.

I always had cookies in the cookies jar for my grandchildren. I also enjoyed planting flower gardens. My favorite flowers were sweet peas, tulips and four o'clock's.

My four sons' were in WWII and the flag in the front window of our home had four blue stars on it, which I am thankful, never had to be changed to gold stars.

I was known as a good cook and cooked at Hammen's and many neighborhood weddings in my later years.

But, I would really like to be remembered for the help I gave mother's delivering their babies. In those days phones were not common and people did not go to the hospital. I found myself being asked to help and that's where I began being a midwife.

I often worked with Dr. Doyle, who I affectionately liked to refer to as "Good Old Doc Doyle", but sometimes the baby arrived before the doctor would get there and I would be there by myself to assist.

In many cases parents and midwives had to make do with things on hand. I remember one case where the baby arrived small and was turning blue. I lined a large basket with a wool blanket, filled quart jars with heated water, then wrapped towels around the jars and placed these around the infant to keep it warm.

In the winter it was often a challenge just to get to the house! One winter evening around 12:00a.m., there was a knock on the door. It was Dr. Doyle. He wondered if I would assist him. This night we went over the old Little Chute Bridge all the way to Darboy. It was a long, cold and slippery trek during those days.

I even had the privilege of helping my oldest daughter Helen deliver her children in their home on Main Street. They were Beata Hinkens, Van Eyck, Hahn, Romy, Daryl and Duane Hinkins and Bonnie (Hinkens) Thews.

In the mid-forties the younger doctors wanted women to go to the hospital to have their babies. One doctor agreed to deliver a baby at home but insisted on having a nurse there. When it came time for the baby to be born, the nurse could not make it and so the husband came to me and explained the situation. Even though I knew the doctor wanted a nurse there, I agreed to go with him, but told him that if I was asked I would have to tell the doctor I was a midwife and not a nurse. But luckily he never asked me.

After many years of delivering babies, most women began having babies in the hospital and my role as midwife was done.

Later in life when my health started to fail, I stayed with my children; Rita De Bruin, Bud Verstegen, Bea Smith and Irene O'Connor.

On July 5 ,1961, I passed away at the age of 75.

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