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*"The Valley's very own weekly newspaper."*

*Vol. 10, No. 39 Sept. 30, 1999*

## The Ropp cabin: portal to the past

by Kirk Talbott

*This house is too small.*

That complaint is often heard when our spacious American homes won't hold one more stick of furniture. But think about living in a sixteen by thirty foot log cabin—about the size of two tool sheds—with three or four other family members?

We're so busy, always taking things for granted and never allowing much time to think about the life of our ancestors.

Consider for a moment the little log cabin located on the grounds of Richard and Diane Reba's historic estate along Old National Pike. If you work in Frederick and live in Middletown, you pass by the cabin every day going to and from work.

The cabin was the original home of German immigrants Georg Wilhelm Ropp and Maria Elise Pfeil. The couple, both from the Hesse-Darmstadt area of Germany, were married in Baltimore on September 14, 1865 upon arriving in America. Their German names were Anglicized to George William and Maria Elisabeth Ropp.

The Ropps set up housekeeping in Frederick County in a place named "Sawmill Bottom" near Frederick. Three years later in 1868, they moved to Middletown Valley and built a log cabin at the bottom of the southwestern slope of Catoclin Mountain.

Depending on who in the family you talk to, the original site of the Ropp cabin is called "High Knob" or "Pee-Wee Hill." It's the hilly area in the woods along US40 just west of Shookstown Road.

The original cabin, built of hand-hewn timbers, had a stone foundation, red brick chimney, tin roof, and two levels. The upper level had two small bedrooms and a storage area. The bottom level was divided into a kitchen, living room, and parlor.

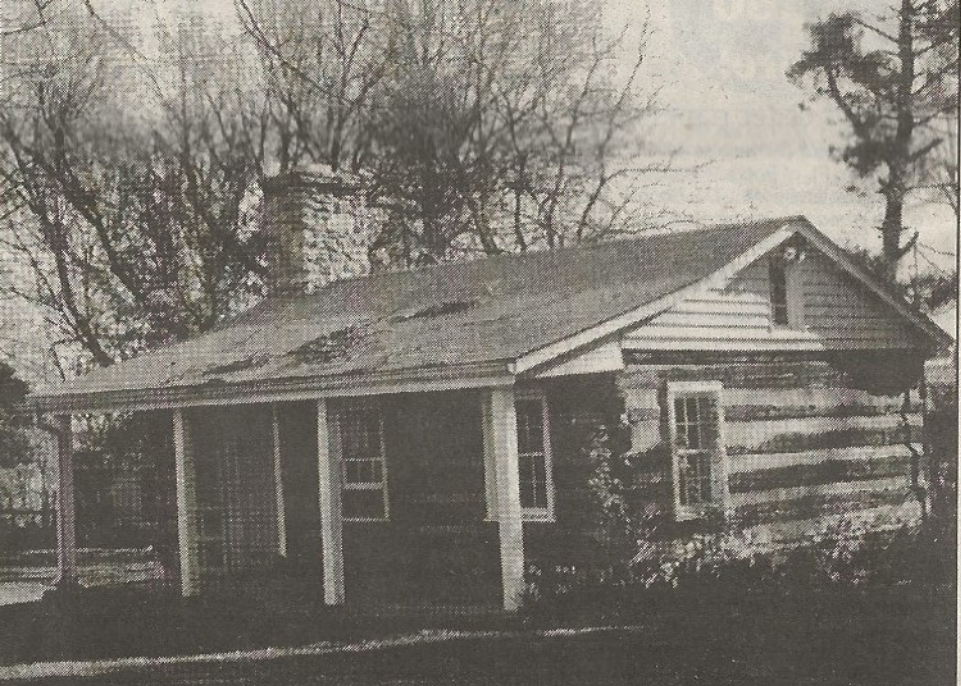
On dim evenings the only light came from candles or oil lamps and the only heat in winter came from the fireplace. Running water? No, they carried it from a spring. Refrigeration? No, they ate salt-cured meats. Indoor toilet? No, they used an outhouse and I'd bet nobody lingered in there long on frosty winter mornings.

This frontier existence made life in the valley hard; raising a family could be a trial. Only two of the five Ropp children born in the cabin—Johan Heinrich (John Henry) born in 1869, and Georg Wilhelm (George William) born in 1872—lived to adulthood.

**G**eorge William Ropp lived in his cabin for 47 years until his death in 1916 at age 74. His obituary in the May 5, 1916 issue of the Valley Register referred to him as an "Honorable Christian gentleman and one of the best known and most highly respected citizens of the northern section of the valley."

After her husband's death, Maria Elisabeth moved out of the cabin and lived on son John Henry's farm near Hawbottom until her death at age 89 in 1930. Both George William and Maria Elisabeth were members of the Evan-

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**Above:**Helen Remsberg and Evelyn Brandenburg, great granddaughters of George and Maria Ropp, stand in front of the restored cabin. **Right:** the cabin as it looks today on the Reba estate.

# Ropp cabin

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gical Lutheran Church Zion in Middletown. Both are buried at the Lutheran cemetery there.

Though family memories are hazy, all agree that in the mid to late 1930s the cabin was occupied by tenants George and Clara Kintz. Mrs. Kintz worked on the farm of George William and Maria Elisabeth's grandson George Philip Ropp. The farm was located on Hollow Road near the present day I-70 overpass. Mrs. Kintz did washing and cleaning chores for George Philip's wife Fannie.

The Kintzes were the last family to occupy the Ropp cabin. In the late forties, construction of US40 through the Mountain cut off access to the cabin from Valley View Road. This, and the lack of modern amenities, made the cabin uninhabitable. It was then that George Philip Ropp contemplated tearing down his grandfather's cabin.

One of George Philip and Fannie Ropp's daughters, Evelyn Brandenburg of Middletown, remembers that her father was approached by a Mr. Kline concerning the cabin.

"I remember my dad saying something to the effect that since the cabin was going to be torn down, Mr. Kline wanted to save the logs," she said. "My dad numbered each log and then took down the cabin log by log and loaded them on a truck in numerical order."

Mrs. Brandenburg recalls that her father moved the logs, without the original foundation, chimney, or roof, and reassembled them at the site where the cabin stands today. Years later, the former owners of Richard and Diane Reba's estate restored the cabin to its present condition.

**A** close look at the cabin today reveals a new chimney and fireplace, a new

roof, and replacement logs. Some of the numbers George Philip marked on the logs for reassembly are still visible. Most of the original hand-hewn logs remain, as well as a few of the porch roof support columns.

Only the top half of the cabin was restored. The ruins of the original stone foundation, chimney, and fireplace are still on Catoctin Mountain.

Another of George Philip and Fannie Ropp's daughters, Helen Remsburg of Jefferson, remembers the cabin at its original site on "Pee-Wee Hill." She concurs with her sister's description of their father methodically tearing the cabin down and moving it.

Mrs. Remsburg also remembers her great grandmother, Maria Elisabeth. "Though I was only seven years old, I can still remember her shouting at me in heavily-accented, broken English for some minor infraction I had committed," she said.

The present generation is lucky to have access to these memories. The Ropp cabin still stands to remind us of the pioneering hardships our forebears had to endure. The next time you're heading down the mountain on the Old National Pike, take a minute to give the cabin a look, and ponder the past. ■



**Marla Ellsabeth Ropp, leaning on rail, and Emma Hooper stand on the porch of the original cabin on Catoctin Mountain, in a photo taken around 1910.**